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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



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Healthy Aging
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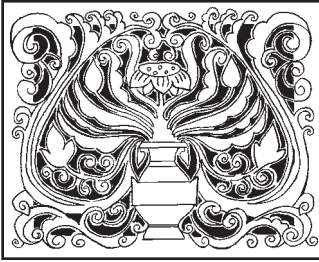
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TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Immortal Living

April 2009
Vol. 114, No. 4

न जायते म्रियते वा विपश्चिन्नायं कुतश्चिन्न बभूव कश्चित् ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥

The intelligent Self is neither born nor does it die; it has not sprung from anything, nor has anything sprung from it. Birthless, eternal, undecaying, and ancient, it is not injured when the body is killed.

(*Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.18)

आ रभस्वेमाममृतस्य श्नुष्टिमच्छिद्यमाना जरदष्टिरस्तु ते ।
असुं त आयुः पुनरा भ्रामि रजस्तमो मोष गा मा प्र मेष्टा ॥

Take you hold of this share of immortality, that you may reach old age without mishap. Spirit and life I now impart to you. Do not vanish into gloom and darkness; do not perish.

(*Atharva Veda*, 8.2.1)

जीवतां ज्योतिरभ्येह्यर्वाङ्गा त्वा हरामि शतशारदाय ।
अवमुञ्चन् मृत्युपाशानशस्तिं द्राघीय आयुः प्रतरं ते दधामि ॥

Come over into the light of the living, I draw you to a life of a hundred autumns. Freeing you from the bonds of death and malediction, I set you further on a longer life.

(8.2.2)

त्र्यम्बकं यजामहे सुगन्धिं पुष्टिवर्धनम् ।
उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय माऽमृतात् ॥

The three-eyed Lord we worship, sweet augments of prosperity. As a (ripe) cucumber from its stem, so may we be freed from the bonds of death; (may we) never be reft of immortality.

(*Rig Veda*, 7.59.12)

पृथ्व्यप्तेजोऽनिलखे समुत्थिते पञ्चात्मके योगगुणे प्रवृत्ते ।
न तस्य रोगो न जरा न मृत्युः प्राप्तस्य योगाग्निमयं शरीरम् ॥

When the fivefold perception of yoga, arising from (concentrating the mind on) earth, water, fire, air, and space, have appeared to the yogin, then he has become possessed of a body made of the fire of yoga, and he will not be touched by disease, old age, or death.

(*Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 2.12)

THIS MONTH

If the recent economic boom in developing countries has been supported by a young population, aging is going to place a significant socioeconomic burden on these societies over the coming decades. Our approach to aging and death greatly influences individual and collective well-being. The Vedic outlook on **Death as Sacrifice**, therefore, has important lessons for all of us.

Many of the problems of development are rooted in our alienation from our spiritual selves. This can have particularly serious repercussions on the aged. Swami Amarananda, Minister-in-Charge, Centre Vedantique, Geneva, reappraises some important questions about **Spirituality and Old Age**.

Individuals coping with the problems of aging provide important insights into approaches and strategies required to deal successfully with aging. In **Facing Old Age**, Swami Ananyananda, one of the most senior monks of the Ramakrishna Order, tells us how attitudinal changes, attenuation of egotism and desires, and an Advaitic outlook can help us in old age.



aging, family, and geriatric care. Swami Narasimhananda, a monastic member of Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, reviews some of these points in **Aging: The Indian Context**.

A Journey through Life is a record of some personal reflections of a senior Indian citizen confronting some of the problems of old age. The author, Dr Dipak Sengupta, is former Chief General Manager, Coal India.

Dr Bithi Sircar, senior physiologist and former Principal, Sri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata, writes about some of the important biological changes associated with aging in **Healthy Aging**. She also discusses how nutrition, exercise, yoga, and spirituality are key elements in maintaining health in old age.

Japan is a true 'aged society'; its citizens have the longest average lifespan in the world. Prof. Tsuyoshi Nara, emeritus professor in foreign studies at Tokyo University and Adviser, Japan-India Society, provides useful insights on the elderly in Japan—their outlook, interests, and problems—in **Japanese Approach to the Elderly**.



Swami Satyasthananda, a monastic member of Belur Math, concludes his study of the **Worship of God as Mother in the Indian Tradition** with an overview of Mother-worship in the Tantras and a brief look at some important Mother-worshippers.

In the sixth instalment of **Narada Bhakti Sutra**, Swami Bhaskareswarananda, former President, Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur, discusses the role of holy company in spiritual life.

In the second instalment of **Girish and Sri Sarada Devi**, Swami Chetananda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, records Girish's reminiscences of his stay at Jayrambati.

EDITORIAL

Death as Sacrifice

*Antakāya mṛtyave namaḥ
prāṇā apānā iha te ramantām;
Ihāyamastu puruṣaḥ sahāsunā
sūryasya bhāge amṛtasya loke.*

Homage to Death, the ender of life. Let your breath—both inward and outward—rest here. Let this man be here with his life in the realm of the Sun, in the world of immortality.

—Atharva Veda, 8.1.1

*Ajarāmaravat prājño vidyām-artham ca cintayet;
Gṛhīta iva keśesu mṛtyunā dharmam-ācaret.*

The wise should pursue knowledge and wealth as though they would never have disease or death; (and) practise dharma as though Death were holding them by the hair.

—Hitopadesha, 1.3

THE Atharva Vedic mantra above is recited by the teacher while touching the student at the navel during the traditional Vedic sacred thread ceremony, *upanayana*. Along with the *Hitopadesha* verse, it reminds us how the shadow of death is inextricably intertwined with every life-affirming activity. Vedic humans were as acutely aware of disease and death as we are. But that did not in any way reduce their zest for life or their serious attempts to lead long and healthy lives. The Vedic rishi prayed:

May my voice remain strong,
my breath unfaltering,
my sight and my hearing acute.
May my hair not turn grey,
nor my teeth become blackened,
nor my arms grow feeble and slack.
May my thighs remain sturdy,
my legs swift to go,
my feet neither stumble nor flag.
May my limbs remain whole,
each performing its function,
and my soul ever unconquered.

This prayer was not a mere personal petition, for the rishis' invocations extended well beyond their limited persons. They prayed:

Blessings be to our mother and father,
blessings to cattle, creatures, and men;
May all well-being and beneficence be ours,
long may we see the sun.

Further:

Peace be in the heavens, in the skies, on earth, in
herbs and trees, in all the gods, in Brahman, in all.
So strengthen me that all beings may regard me
with the eye of a friend.

May I regard all beings with the eye of a friend.
With the eye of a friend may we regard one
another.

That the Vedic rishis felt confident their mantras could bring back humans from the clutches of death is illustrated in the efforts made by Subandhu's brothers to bring him to life after he had been struck down by the incantations of rival priests:

May your soul, that has gone far to Yama,
son of Vivasvan, return
so that you may again live and dwell here.
May his life be renewed and further extended,
as by two skilled charioteers pursuing their
course. A fall increases one's desire to live; (as
in the case of Chyavana) may Nirriti, the goddess of death and destruction move far away.

Rishi Chyavana represents the possibility of rejuvenation. He had grown old and decrepit performing tapas when he happened to be assaulted by King Sharyata's children. Though the sage did not protest this evil act, it brought a host of suffering and misfortune on Sharyata's people. Sharyata hurried to Chyavana and offered his daughter Sukanya in marriage to the sage. Sukanya served Chyavana

with great devotion. Once, when the celestial physicians Ashwini-kumaras asked her to marry them, she indignantly refused, affirming her fidelity to her old husband. Now Chyavana had told Sukanya about the reason for the Ashwini-kumaras' imperfection—they had been excluded from partaking of Soma during a sacrifice conducted by the gods at Kurukshetra. She persuaded the celestial physicians to restore Chyavana's youth in exchange for this knowledge. The Aswini-kumaras advised Chyavana to bathe in a certain pond and this restored him to youth. Ayurvedic rejuvenation therapists still hark back to Chyavana.

One Chyavana, however, does not make for perpetual youth in an entire population. The host of Dirghayu Suktas, supplications for long life, and the numerous hymns to ward off specific diseases and disasters found in the Atharva Veda testify to an awareness of the hazards of living. If the Vedic humans were able to maintain a joyous outlook on life, it was because death to them was a mere signpost on a long journey, and not an insuperable barrier marking the end of the road.

'The human being,' the *Shatapatha Brahmana* declares, 'is in debt to death right from birth. When he performs sacrifice he purchases himself back from death.' Life is a constant fight for survival, most of which is waged without our conscious participation by the body's defence mechanisms. Living also involves a series of exchanges between our person and the environment. We depend on external sources for the food and drink that nourish our body and furnish us with energy, for the mental and intellectual stimuli that foster our linguistic, logical, and emotional skills, as well as the insights that lead us to the portals of the joys derived from our spiritual Self. We are also constantly made to give of ourselves in the cosmic web of life. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* announces: 'This self (the individual) is an object of enjoyment to all beings. That he makes oblations in the fire and performs sacrifices is how he becomes such an object of enjoyment to the gods. That he studies the Vedas is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to the rishis. That he makes of-

ferings to the manes and desires children is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to the manes. That he gives shelter to people as well as food is how he becomes such an object to them. And that beasts and birds, and even the ants, feed in his home is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to these.'

The Vedic rishis made an important discovery about the nature of this inexorable cycle: 'Just as one wishes safety to one's body, so do all beings wish safety to him who knows this web as such.' A conscious participation in this cosmic sacrifice not only ensures one's safety and well-being, it is also a source of joy. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* reminds us that Mahidasa Aitareya, knowing life to be a sacrifice, lived for a hundred and sixteen years. Krishna was thus taught by Ghora Angirasa: 'That a man feels hunger and thirst, that he does not feel happy—this is his initiation rite. That he eats, drinks, and feels happy is the Upasad sacrifice. That he laughs, eats, and has intercourse is the chanting and recitation in sacrifice. His austerity, charity, sincerity, non-injury, and speaking the truth are offerings to the priests and others. ... Death is surely his finishing bath.'

Death, according to this world view, is a natural change of body; as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* puts it: 'When this body becomes thin—is emaciated through old age or disease—then, as a mango, or a fig, or a fruit of the pipal tree is detached from its stalk, so does this infinite being, completely detaching itself from the parts of the body, again go, in the same way that it came, to particular bodies, for the unfoldment of its vital force.'

And the cosmos is an active participant in this exchange: 'Just as when a king is coming, the guards, charioteers, and village leaders wait for him with varieties of food and drink and mansions ready, saying, "Here he comes, here he comes" so for the person who knows about the results of his work, all the elements wait saying, "Here comes Brahman, here he comes."' This person's funeral is only another sacrifice, albeit the last in this life, the *antyeshti*, which cannot but give the sacrificer the satisfaction of a life well-lived, and others a sense of reverence for nature's ways.

Spirituality and Old Age

Swami Amarananda

SINCE we are destined to live out our lives in the prison of our minds,' said Peter Ustinov, 'our one duty is to furnish it well.' To furnish the mind well we need to tap its intellectual, cultural, and spiritual potential. A totally secular education with a curriculum shorn of spiritual elements would be disastrous for any nation; it would give rise to individuals with sharp minds tending to busy sophisticated selfishness and conceit as seeming uprightness. These people, with only a veneer of external correctness, would break their families through infidelity, become parents of would-be violent youths, sow chaos in the body politic in spite of their grandiose planning, and would likely have an ignoble end to their lives.

In all ancient civilizations an elderly person was perceived as a repository of love, wisdom, and spirituality. The image of the old age resembled that of the old sage. In India we have this archetype in Bhishma of the Mahabharata story. The model has also been immortalized by Cicero in his portrayal of Cato the Elder.¹ But wrinkles on the face coupled with a wise mind, as in the case of Bhishma or Cato, do not come into being without an effort on the part of the individual.

Healthy Old Age Is Built Up in Youth

We begin life on earth as babies, and then continue through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to end in old age. Hagiographies of the world show that spiritual qualities were manifest even in the childhood of numerous renunciants. In fact, these qualities are also apparent in the early lives of spiritually inclined householders, who for some reason or other have not opted for a God-centred life in a cloister. Scriptures like the Bhagavadgita affirm that only the cultivation of yogic qualities, and not the

outer trappings we associate with holiness, makes for progress in spiritual life. Parents and teachers, however, should place before children the lives of spiritual heroes—their humility, their perseverance to get to the spiritual verity, their success, and their loving service to society. The best possibilities of a person's reaching a mentally and spiritually healthy old age exist when he or she is exposed to such spiritual models from childhood, preferably by the parents. Adolescents tend to be idealistic; they develop a sense of fairness in interpersonal relations. They change over from a self-centred perspective to a considerate attitude towards others, and from total acceptance of adult moral judgement to the development of their own values. The histories of freedom movements in many countries, or the story of the Ramakrishna Order, show how deeply adolescents feel for a noble cause. Hundreds of them endeavoured to join monasteries of this Order and many had to be gently dissuaded because they lacked maturity or were in need of being groomed in higher centres of learning. Educational systems should attempt to properly utilize this enthusiasm present in adolescents, foster their thinking skills, and thus promote higher levels of ethics and morality.

The ancient Indian way of introducing brahmacharya² into the educational system is taboo to many social scientists around the world. But one need not be deterred by the attitude of caretakers of education who are against brahmacharya. 'What formerly appeared to me to be extravagant praise of Brahmacharya in our religious books seems now,' wrote Mahatma Gandhi, 'with increasing clearness every day, to be absolutely proper and founded on experience.'

The fire of idealism has to be tended throughout late adolescence—roughly between fifteen and

eighteen years—and during the youth.³ Otherwise, the puberty-propelled idealism, in most cases, would wither away.

Spirituality generally blossoms in two ways: through an inward journey or through an enhanced desire and ability to serve others, embracing personal sacrifice if required. Hundreds of adolescents and adults who blazed upon the history of India's freedom movement by their inspiring sacrifice had one thing in common: a passion for spirituality. Garibaldi, the maker of unified Italy, was a model hero for the Indian nationalists of the nineteenth century. His idealism was triggered at the age of twenty-four, following a chance meeting with Giovanni Battista Cuneo in an inn in the seaport city of Taganrog.

When people are about to settle in family life in late youth or in adulthood, especially in these days of accelerating competition and job insecurity, when they are busy in the search for a suitable companion in conjugal life, the fire of idealism, tended for so long, is apparently extinguished. But it is not so; it remains buried like fire under rice-hull ashes to become manifest in late adulthood. It is not without reason that law books of the Hindus concurred that a householder should embrace the third stage of life and live in a purely spiritual manner when 'wrinkles and grey hair appear on his person'.

Materialism: Reasons and Reactions

It is useful to understand the broad reasons why our society has been invaded by what is opposite to spirituality. The following cascade of events in recent human history is mainly responsible for increasing materialistic lifestyles in the present days: A sustained acceleration of national hyper-greed for material objects began when Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella sponsored Columbus's expedition in search of a new sea route to Asia. This was further accelerated when, two and a half centuries later, the Industrial Revolution was ushered in. Materialism got a scientific and philosophical boost through the works of Darwin and Marx.⁴ In the twentieth century, the world wars shook even more the faith of many Christians in the existence of a

good God. Since the 1980s, TV programmes as a tool of propagation of non-spiritual ideas have been in vogue and are passively accepted.⁵ In 1990 Berners-Lee, at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), developed the first web browser, thus helping launch the global Internet. The emergence of the Internet is coeval with the somersault of human society from the industrial to the information revolution. In his book *The Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler had already predicted that such a revolution was imminent. By presenting these details we are not holding a brief for machine-phobia; we only wish to emphasize the cultivation of spirituality to combat the dominance of humanity by machine.

The stress induced by the information revolution is itself pushing thousands of men and women to the search for inner stability. Meditation was popularized a generation back with the trumpet blast of Transcendental Meditation in the media. In the US, since the 1960s, many people disenchanted with Christian theology and also with authoritarian gurus, have been seeking the realization of what Aldous Huxley called 'human potential'. They inaugurated the New Age movement, with Esalen Institute in California as its Mecca. The world outside the New Age movement has, for many well-founded reasons, mixed perceptions about it and the Esalen Institute. But there is little doubt that they come from the bosom of the American youth,⁶ in which there is a thirst for spirituality along with pronounced individualism. The New Age movement will have impact on the emerging spiritual culture of Europe and the rest of world as well.

Ana Aslan, the famous gerontologist of Bucharest, enunciated her Decalogue on Gerontophylaxis in the 1950s. Since then the West has been doing intensive research to push back old age. Both scientists and charlatans have joined the fray to prolong youthfulness. Hundreds of magazines disseminate every year a gamut of recipes for rejuvenation. Body cult has become a flourishing commerce with clients ranging from the youthful to the superannuated. The all-absorbing attention to push furrows off one's face till the ninetieth year and be-

yond is like a double-edged saw—if this preoccupation is not attenuated it becomes a contributing factor to the neglect of one's spiritual dimension.⁷

Rights, Dignity, and Difficulty in Secular Care

There have been a lot of speeches and writings about the rights of the aged. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentions these rights comprehensively.⁸ One key word in that declaration is 'dignity'. If the word means the quality of being worthy of respect, then one's permanent dignity is achieved through one's spiritual elevation. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that humans are worthy of being called so only if they are conscious of their spiritual dignity.⁹

Among Hindus the care and social dignity of the aged used to be assured by the dictates of the Dharma-shastras—books on social and religious laws—corroborated by examples from the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and other religious books. The message was engraved in the national psyche for several millennia. Adult sons who did not look after their aged parents would invariably invite social opprobrium. The system worked well without old age homes and insurance agencies. But materialism is creeping into India too. And this has hit old people hard, since public health and social services of municipal bodies are not yet adequately developed.¹⁰ So laws have become necessary to protect the aged from neglect and cruelty.¹¹

Many years back in Geneva, I offered myself as a volunteer for one afternoon to serve hundreds of aged people. The programme was organized by the Red Cross; the elderly citizens were escorted from their homes, if necessary, to a hall where they were entertained with food and music. When the dinner was over and the hall almost empty, I went to an old lady who was still sitting at the table. 'Do you need an escort to go back home?' I asked her. With tears in her eyes, she replied: 'I am a widow for the last thirty-four years. I am alone. It is December. But I get no Christmas card. There is none to invite me on the evening of Christmas.' I assured her: 'Madam, I cordially welcome you to the Vedanta

Centre on Christmas evening.' Loneliness seems to be ubiquitous in materially advanced nations; it is also slowly invading developing countries. It is quite a suffering for a significant portion of the old population, especially men.

Since women are more communicative, they talk about their problems to unburden themselves. Old men often do not do that, thus increasing their suffering through excessive brooding on their difficulties and finally seeking an escape through suicide.¹² The widowed, the divorced, the recently bereaved, the cancer-stricken, the financially crippled, the solitary, and those who abuse alcohol or drugs are particularly prone to commit suicide. A European Union study on parasuicide, based on data collected from thirteen member states between 1989 and 1993, provided the following facts for the 65 and over age group: a mean suicide rate of about 30 per 100,000; and a mean parasuicide rate of more than 60 per 100,000.¹³ The number of old people depressively carrying the cross of life is many times bigger than the number of those committing suicide. Still larger is the number of old people who have lost a sense of purpose in life, who have fear of death, and who contemplate death as a solution to their problems—they are victims of death ideation.¹⁴ The UN estimates that, compared to the 1995 figures, the ratio of old people to the working group—from 15 to 64 years of age—will double in more developed nations and triple in less developed ones by 2050.

Social Significance of Spirituality in the Elderly

The aforementioned facts would impress upon us the social importance of spiritual awakening in the aged. Without spiritual training and understanding old people will find no meaning in existence, no shield against the silent disdain of the world towards them, nothing to soothe the spirit ruffled by the several problems that often accompany old age—discomfort, disease, bereavement, frustration—no tool to tackle the memory of trauma or injustice experienced in life, and above all no assurance beyond their earthly effacement. The spectre of annihilation is ubiquitous.

Even a partial spiritual awakening helps a person accept suffering, including that of a fatal disease, with a certain degree of calmness. Sometimes a misfortune can get transmuted on the anvil of spirituality. I have seen quite a few men and women of adamant character, both in Europe and in India, who in spite of the difficulties of old age bear a beaming countenance. Recently I met a mother on the threshold of old age. She was emaciated and knew she would die in three weeks. She told me: 'I have no pain or sorrow. My mind is prayerful.' I know another lady who is old and frail. Through sincere prayer and repetition of God's name, she has achieved mystical experience in her old age. With the divine grace showered on her, she is calmly facing her present ailments. It is inspiring to come across such human beings!

Dr A Stuckelberger, president of the Swiss Society of Gerontology, feels keenly the need for making spiritual opportunities available to the aged. One problem in talking about spirituality in public forums is that it means different things to different religious groups, and only superstition to non-religious people. But, as has been demonstrated by Swami Vivekananda and affirmed by others coming after him,¹⁵ the rich mystical insights of the East can be dovetailed with the creative intelligence of people having a Western mindset. It is possible to give all sections of the population, even atheists, a taste of spirituality. The result would convince everyone that this is feasible, provided no formal enunciation of spirituality or purpose of life is proffered, as such enunciations are likely to create conflict.

In old age one is free from the burden of earning one's bread. But one should not be caught in the syndrome of frequent golf and bridge games to kill time. Old people, if they continue to live, will grow very old. So they should try to grow spiritually as well, for spirituality is an asset when one crosses eighty and becomes a very old person (VOP).¹⁶ At this age the functional capacity of one's vital organs are markedly reduced. VOPs often suffer from dementia. The three 'F's—fear, phlegm, and flatulence—diminish their quality of life. Reduction in outdoor mobility means loss of autonomy. It is

hard for a VOP to cope with highway traffic or to undertake outdoor leisure activities; even 'activities of daily living' like bathing or 'instrumental activities of daily living' like cooking become problematic. Moreover, one is buffeted at short intervals by news of friends and relatives dying. Sometimes the dysthymia of younger days evolves into full-blown depression. In some cases sons or daughters live far away. So even with laurels won in youth and with enough wealth, VOPs often feel forlorn.

On the other hand, it is necessary to create sufficient institutions to derive profit from the experience of aged people. Those elderly who still have a relatively good health can prove helpful in cautioning youngsters against pitfalls, passing on essential values, boosting up the disconsolate, helping as wonderful baby-sitters, volunteering for non-profit organizations, protesting actively against excessive sex and violence on TV or corruption in public life, and of course sharing their spiritual wisdom. In so doing they can be useful members of society and cease to be a burden for the working population.

Spiritual wisdom must of course be first acquired before it can be disseminated. And the best result is achieved through a blending of faculties and judicious use of one's time: working in the spirit of loving service, praying, reading with reflection, meditating, listening to elevating music, and practising concentration. Swami Vivekananda's friend Josephine MacLeod is a famous example of such harmonious blending of faculties in spiritual pursuit.

Spiritual Food for the Atheist Too

Once a functionary of the Chinese government told me how, through well-planned reading material, they try to impress upon Chinese children that the belief in God is a superstition.¹⁷ The number of atheists, agnostics, and dogma-neutral persons shying away from organized religions is increasing. Atheists and agnostics think that God is like a paper pile that is being flattened by the hammering of science. Non-dogmatic and spiritual people feel that God is buried under the debris of untenable doctrines.

In this respect, the case of Antony Flew should

be an eye-opener for atheists of our time. Flew, the arch-atheist philosopher of the second half of twentieth century, changed his opinion in 2003, when he was eighty.¹⁸ His book *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* was published in 2007. G Schroeder, the famous nuclear physicist and author of *The Hidden Face of God*, had a role in the change of Flew's views.¹⁹ Schroeder's philosophical ideas reflect Vedantic principles.

Many atheists and agnostics, however, sincerely search for the truth they do not find in religious dogmas. Some others like Möller de la Rouvière, author of *Spirituality without God*, berate, in J Krishnamurti's style, all religions and religious teachers, teachings, traditions, and above all, the 'Great Other'—God; yet they give easy hints for a kind of spiritual progress that, though falling short of any mystical experience, is enough for people who do not want or cannot digest more than that. There are valid reasons that give credibility to the Hindu idea of reincarnation, along with the tendencies and convictions brought to the fore from previous lives.²⁰ The idea is not limited to the Hindu faith. According to Buddhism, at the time of death the aggregates—matter, awareness, feeling, perception, and mental formations—are resolved into their causal factors to form a new group of aggregates associated with *punarbhava*, coming into existence again. This is close to the Hindu idea of reincarnation. Jesus himself and the pre-Justinian Christians believed in reincarnation.²¹ Many minor Christian denominations as well as members of Jainism, Sikhism, Hassidic Judaism, Druzism,²² and Alawite Shias subscribe to the concept. About one-third of the world population under the sway of non-aboriginal religions officially accepts some sort of metempsychosis.

Related to this notion is the Hindu idea of dying with a spiritual thought. There are rare instances of persons on the verge of death having a flash of goodness in their minds, a thought of helping the destitute rather than craving selfishly for worldly things.²³ For VOPs the hope for spiritual progress is bolstered by the doctrine of reincarnation and by the corollary that no sincere attempt in the right direction is lost.

Ancient Indian Wisdom and Modern Care

Health, healing, and well-being are influenced positively through spiritual awakening. The idea of reincarnation is just one of the several handy tools available to tackle dysthymia, suicidal ideation, and passive death wish as well as recurrent major depression common in old age. Friends and relatives are normally prepared for the news of a VOP's death. But a person who is close to death needs the assurance that the soul of a living being is imperishable and unchangeable.²⁴ The technique of dying spiritually has been outlined by Sri Krishna in the eighth chapter of the Bhagavadita. It may be difficult to transport Gita's methods to the context of Semitic religions, but some of these ideas, presented in a way that does not touch the sensibility of non-Hindus, may help improve the situation in old age.²⁵ The Diocese of Oxford has a project called Special Care for Older People (SCOP), which has the following aims: i) raising awareness about older people's issues, concerns, and spiritual needs; ii) offering ongoing training; iii) working alongside other agencies; iv) building up good practices in the spiritual care of older people; v) encouraging older people to become involved; vi) developing a library of appropriate resource material.

The European Commission is trying to improve the information and communication technology (ICT) uptake of the aged. ICT is a great aid for combating isolation in old age. Social service departments of many important cities in the West have programmes for VOPs with reduced mobility—residences, excursions, meals, spectacles, seniors' clubs, and the like—and for welcoming and entertaining the aged with various kinds of talks, shows, and other events. The SCOP project is worthy of emulation by religious bodies and NGOs engaged in the field of old age care.

Along with banking on traditional wisdom, India needs to incorporate some of the aforesaid facilities provided to the aged if her model is to be appreciated globally. Apart from the reincarnation theory, India has a cultural-cum-spiritual heritage which is of paramount significance to the elderly

everywhere.²⁶ In the not-so-distant past, India had been a role model for the care of the aged in the family, and this shows that it has the capacity to start pilot projects covering those subtle subjective emotional and spiritual needs usually overlooked by caregivers. Indian government and society should take a lead in keeping the aged with their kin—or if this is not possible, with their friends—and yet supplement the care given to the aged in proportion to its vast potential and its ancient wisdom: ‘You (God) are walking with the stick in the form of the debilitated old person.’²⁷



Notes and References

1. ‘Those who look for all happiness from within can never think anything bad which Nature makes inevitable. In that category before anything else comes old age, to which all wish to attain, and at which all grumble when attained. Such is Folly’s inconsistency and unreasonableness! They say that it is stealing upon them faster than they expected. In the first place, who compelled them to hug an illusion? For in what respect did old age steal upon manhood faster than manhood upon childhood? In the next place, in what way would old age have been less disagreeable to them if they were in their eight-hundredth year than in their eightieth? For their past, however long, when once it was past, would have no consolation for a stupid old age. Wherefore, if it is your wont to admire my wisdom—and I would that it were worthy of your good opinion and of my own surname of Sapiens—it really consists in the fact that I follow Nature, the best of guides, as I would a god, and am loyal to her commands. It is not likely, if she has written the rest of the play well, that she has been careless about the last act like some idle poet. But after all some “last” was inevitable, just as to the berries of a tree and the fruits of the earth there comes in the fullness of time a period of decay and fall. A wise man will not make a grievance of this. To rebel against Nature—is not that to fight like the giants with the gods?’ *Cicero: On Old Age*, trans. E S Shuckburgh.
2. Brahmacharya is celibacy in a narrow sense only. It is much more than that; it is a movement towards the ultimate Truth or Brahman. In ancient India students strictly observed celibacy. In married life sex was not conceived as an indulgence, but as a means of procreation. Celibacy for the married person meant restraint from sexual indulgence and from infidelity to the partner. In the third stage of life, the married gradually came back to a life of celibacy and simplicity. And finally, in the fourth stage, the individual strove to go beyond all desires and egocentricity, sublimating the sexual energy, and thus became totally occupied in the search for the ultimate Truth.
3. Youth is defined by the UN as the period between fifteen and twenty-four years of age. Girls normally attain maturity about two years ahead of boys.
4. Darwin’s theory of evolution contradicted the biblical theory of humankind conceived as descendant of Adam and Eve. The slogans ‘struggle for existence’ and ‘survival of the fittest’, derived from his theory, were employed to justify colonial exploitation. Darwin’s eminence drove many people from Christianity to agnosticism and softened the qualms of their conscience in accepting the subjugation of millions under the boots of colonialists. Marx wrote: ‘Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is a spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.’
5. ‘Sex, nudity, violence, and vulgar language have become regular ingredients of the dramas, documentaries, and reality TV staples that make up the British TV diet. Scenes that would have provoked a furor 15 years ago now rarely cause a fuss.’ *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 September 2003.
6. Both Michael Murphy and Dick Price were in their early thirties when they founded the Esalen Institute.
7. In reply to a query from a disciple about practising hatha yoga postures, Sri Sarada Devi said, ‘If you practise them too much, your mind may become attached to the body, but if you give them up, you stand the risk of falling sick. Keeping this in mind, act accordingly.’
8. ‘Everyone is entitled to all ... rights and freedoms ... Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization ... of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality. ... Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.’ General Assem-

bly of the United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, articles 2, 22, 25.

9. Sri Ramakrishna liked to play on the word *manush*, the Bengali term for 'man', saying that it means the combination of *man* and *hu(n)sh*—dignity and consciousness.
10. Between 60 and 64 years, 10% of Indians suffer from impaired mobility, and 10% are hospitalized at any given time. More than 50% of Indians above 70 years of age suffer from chronic diseases. P H Reddy, 'The Health of the Aged in India', *Health Transition Review*, supplement to vol 6 (Australian National University, 1996), 233.
11. Himachal Pradesh's Maintenance of Parents and Dependents Bill, dated 1996, was the first of its kind in India. The bill contains a statement of objectives and reasons: 'In the developing age of science and technology, our old virtues are giving way to materialistic and separatistic tendencies. The younger generations are neglecting their wives, children, and aged and infirm parents, who are now being left beggared and destitute on the scrapheap of society, thereby driven to a life of vagrancy, immorality, and crime for their subsistence.' On 6 December 2007, a more comprehensive bill of this genre was passed by the Indian Parliament.
12. According to the World Health Organization China is the only country where the suicide rate among women is higher than that among men.
13. D Beeston, *Older People and Suicide* (West Midlands: Staffordshire University, 2006), 9.
14. In 1997, in UK, 20% of the population had death ideation in the two preceding years. In Germany, the figure was comparable in the course of just one week. In Sweden, suicidal or death ideation in the course of a month in 1996 was reported as about 16%.
15. See, for instance, *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, vol 8: 'Reflections on My Life and Writings'. The Indian School of Business at Hyderabad has a new Centre for Leadership, Innovation, and Change that structures its teaching and research programmes on the basis of the inter-connectedness of India's traditional wisdom and the cognitive science and management theories of the West.
16. In 2004 there were 7.5 millions VOPs in India; the US has nearly 1.5 times and China twice the number.
17. I told the Chinese dignitary that M N Roy, an Indian communist leader of international stature, was a believer in an impersonal God.
18. See Flew's video entitled *Has Science Discovered God?* (2004). Among other things Flew says that the investigation of DNA 'has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved.' Flew's concept about God is more Vedantic than Semitic.
19. 'A single consciousness, a universal wisdom, pervades the universe. The discoveries of science, those that search the quantum nature of subatomic matter, have moved us to the brink of a startling realization: all existence is the expression of this wisdom. In the laboratories we experience it as information that first physically articulated as energy and then condensed into the form of matter. Every particle, every being, from atom to human, appears to represent a level of information, of wisdom.' Gerald Schroeder, *The Hidden Face of God* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), xi.
20. Experiments in parapsychology point out that reincarnation is not a baseless doctrine. Many cases of *jatismaras*—people remembering acquaintances and things associated with their previous existences—have been proved to be authentic.
21. Matthew, 17.12–13.
22. Druzism, an outstanding religious movement in the Middle East, is considered by some to be Islamic and by some others as non-Islamic.
23. On 21 November 2008 an eleven-year-old boy, Brenden Foster, died of leukaemia in the Seattle area. Before dying he knew that his days were numbered. On his return from the clinic he saw the homeless people of Nickelsville. The condition of these people touched his heart. He expressed a wish that homeless people should be provided with food and drink. His wish, flashed by the media, created a surge of generosity towards the homeless across the US.
24. See *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.17.6 and *Bhagavad-gita*, chapter 2.
25. In many countries with Christian majorities, a significant number of parents are rising in aversion against the teaching of hatha yoga postures in schools, because these are perceived as a way of subtle proselytization.
26. A galaxy of Indian saints and devotees have illustrated submission to the divine will through their lives. Extending life with the notion that beyond it there is extinction of joy is not a Hindu attitude. Aging with spiritual orientation in Varanasi and other places of pilgrimage is part of Indian spiritual culture. Above all, the Indian penchant for contact with the Divine gives a mission to the soul in a worn-out frame.
27. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 4.3.



Facing Old Age

Swami Ananyananda

HOW we face old age depends on our attitude. Swami Vivekananda has outlined the attitude of the sannyasins in his ‘Song of the Sannyasin’. Old age is like taking sannyasa, retiring from active life. But we have also to continue living in society. So when our work is over it is our mental outlook that is to be changed; we have to view things from the perspective of retirement. God-realization is the main idea underpinning the sannyasin’s life. You can live a monk’s life even while working. Sri Ramakrishna has given us the ideal of ‘*shiva jnane jiva seva*, service to humans knowing them to be divine’. This perspective on work is entirely different from the secular attitude. If you have it, then there is no problem, no conflict between work and inaction. You have to work; do the work and then leave it aside; do not carry it in your mind. Work is separate from your being.

I have seen Swami Madhavananda (1888–1965) working as the general secretary of the Ramakrishna Order. He would sit in a deck-chair in a small room and do his work. He had eczema all over his body, but his mind was clear and unaffected by the ailment. He would apply medicinal cream, cover the eruptions with plantain leaves, and work on his translation of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. His was a very strict life.

It is our mental attitude that matters. How you cultivate your mind is what makes a difference. Your attitude towards your personal life and work is very important. Swami Vireswarananda mentions the importance of harmonizing the four yogas—bhakti, karma, jnana, and raja—in one’s life. Ac-

cording to Swami Vivekananda one’s personality is well-rounded only when all these faculties are harmoniously developed. You must work for this when you are physically fit. You may memorize the Upanishads, Bhagavadgita, and other scriptures in your youth. When you become old, you cannot remember all of them. But you can still recite and live by whatever you remember.

When you are young you have the power to resist, the ability to fight adversity. But as you grow old you become conscious of your helplessness. You have to depend on others even for such simple activities as brushing your teeth or taking bath. You have to understand your position and adapt yourself accordingly. That is the teaching I got from Swami Sarvagatananda in Karachi—understand the situation and adjust yourself, then there would not be any problem. The world will not adjust to you. It will not change. You have to adapt yourself to the changing situation if you want to remain happy and composed. Otherwise there will be perpetual conflict. There is no alternative to undergoing the suffering that old age often entails; neither can you take away your life—that is considered improper in the Indian tradition.

Making the Whole World One’s Own

It is only through suitable adjustments that you can master the circumstances in which you find yourself in old age and maintain your equanimity and peace of mind. And this is very much possible. Otherwise you will constantly be fighting—this is not good, that is bad, and so on. You will always be finding

fault. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi has said that we should not see others' faults; rather we should see our own faults. And she also wanted us to make the whole world our own! What a great Vedantin she was! The whole of Vedanta is contained in this one sentence: 'Make the whole world your own.' Kapila says, '*Aham sarveshu bhuteshu bhutatma avasthitah sada*; I (the Divine) abide in all beings as their inmost soul.' That is what Holy Mother also says, though in a different language: the whole world is your own; none is a stranger. But do we feel that? We feel closer and friendlier to some; some others appear very repulsive, their very appearance produces aversion. The world is not uniform. We meet people of different temperaments, everyone cannot be to our liking and we cannot be liked by everyone. So we have to adjust.

Some make an effort to understand the people they meet, form genuine affiliations, and try to live happily. There are numerous problems in human relationships. Meeting of minds is rare. Serious differences between husband and wife are common. So many unpleasant things follow; families disintegrate. Earlier, it was not so much of a problem. There were happy close-knit families; father, mother, brother, and sister—all would try to live happily despite differences. The joint family system was a blessing in this respect. Now that is gone. Instead we have small nuclear families that tend to break up more easily. Thus society keeps changing; we have to adjust ourselves to the times—to the social changes, the change in values—if we wish to live happily.

Attenuating Ego and Desire

The old should not impose themselves on others. If people seek their guidance, then they may pass on whatever experience they have. But if they go on dictating, they are likely to be ignored; most people do not like being told what they ought to do. Guidance is different from dictating. Do not seek, do not shun. Whatever comes of its own accord, do that. You have to keep adapting yourself to the times. Age overtakes us. We know that this is inevitable; we see things changing continuously. We see

people dying every day. Yet our ego, *ahamkara*, is so strong that we are unable to accept that we too shall have to leave our bodies. We should be prepared for that. Nothing is perfect in this world. It is our duty to try to improve ourselves and the things under our control as much as possible. But we also need to remember that, whatever we may do, one day we shall pass away, our bodies will die.

Why should you desire? If you do not have any desire, you will be happy. The Gita says:

*Prajahati yada kaman
sarvan partha manogatan;
Atmanyevatmana tushtah
sthitaprajnas-tadochyate.*

O Partha, when one fully renounces all desires of the mind, and remains satisfied in the Self alone through the Self, then is one called a person of steady wisdom.

You have to channelize your desires, not suppress them. Suppression is not healthy. Instead you should channelize them positively and slowly annihilate them.

Living Advaita

If one is dedicated to the ultimate goal of life—God-realization or establishment in one's true Being—and if one is grounded in Advaita Vedanta, then aging and death are but passing phases in one's journey to the Supreme. It is very difficult to become identified with the Truth underlying our being. To be able to experience and say, 'I am not the body, I am not the mind,' is a very high stage, which is difficult to attain. The pain and suffering caused by the body will remain. Old age comes, you cannot avoid it. There is disease; and Sri Ramakrishna has said that you have to take care of the body, you cannot neglect it, you have to consult the doctor. Some people pass away while sleeping; they are blessed. That will not happen to everybody. Everyone has to experience the result of their karma. The knowledge that 'I am of the nature of pure Consciousness, I am Shiva; *chidananda rupah shivo'ham, shivo'ham*' is very difficult to attain. Sometimes you may feel a glimpse of it; but

we must remember that intellectual understanding is one thing while intuitive experience is entirely different. All the same, this jnana can be attained.

Suffering is common in old age. Good people, with good families, who have lead good lives, even they suffer. So to attain a measure of detachment one needs to cultivate devotion to God. Sri Ramakrishna has pointed out that even a householder can become a devotee and develop dispassion, can renounce. There are great householders leading pure lives. The householder's renunciation is internal, in the mind, whereas the monk has to renounce both internally and externally.

In old age you need not achieve anything. You have contributed something in your earlier days; whatever that contribution might have been, it is now over. A feeling of not being able to contribute to society is inevitable. Hence you have to cultivate the understanding that you have done enough. If you are not able to do anything in old age you ought to realize that you need not be doing something all the time. The satisfaction of work done while young is sometimes of little use when one grows old. This is a matter of personal feeling. Nevertheless, at an advanced age you generally have no obligations. This is the time when one has to live with the knowledge of Advaita, of pure Being.

Advaita is difficult to practise. When at Madras a pandit asked him if he was an Advaitin or a Dvaitin, Swami Vivekananda replied, 'So long as I have

this body, I am a dualist, but not afterwards.' The *Drig-Drishya Viveka* says:

*Dehabhimane galite vijnate paramatmani;
Yatra yatra mano yati tatra tatra samadhyah.*

With the disappearance of attachment to the body and with the realization of the Supreme Self, whatever object the mind is directed to becomes an occasion for samadhi.

As long as one is conscious of the body, the idea of separateness remains. It is mere impudence to say, 'I am not the body', when all the while you are feeling it. You feel even a pinch. So *dehabhimana*, identification with the body, should go; *ahamkara* should go; *mano nasha*, total attenuation of the mind, must take place—only then is one truly established in Advaita. And that is a very high state of experience.

Success in facing old age depends on how you have lived in your younger days. If you have lived a disciplined life, you will have peace now. If you have lived a reckless life and wish to now change your life all of a sudden when you are old, that is not possible. What you do in your early life or previous lives, you pay for in old age. Do not complain. Whatever you have done is done. Remember to avoid fresh wrongs. Everyone can teach us something. We can learn because we have the capacity to discriminate. So avoid all unwholesome company and activities. You have to keep your eyes and ears open till your last breath.

PB

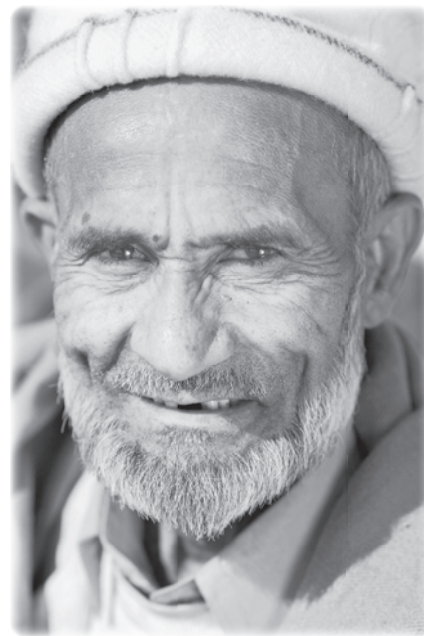


Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been.

—Mark Twain

Among all my patients in the second half of life ... there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life.

—Carl Jung



Aging: The Indian Context

Swami Narasimhananda

‘WHY do you want a housing loan at this age? What happened to your present house?’ The volley of questions from the chief personnel officer of the hospital where Shila worked fell on her stoic face. ‘I cannot help you if you do not give me the details,’ said the chief sternly, much to the embarrassment of Shila, whose colleagues were standing nearby.

Shila could not contain herself any longer and started sobbing. ‘Sir, yesterday night my two sons drove me and my husband out of the house we had built out of our hard-earned savings. We have a small plot of land nearby. We spent the night there in a shed. Our sons now want us to build another house and be away from their lives. This is why I need the loan badly. What is my fault? I brought up my two sons and daughter as best I could. Neither I nor my husband have had any formal education. Both of us worked hard day and night, got our daughter married, and procured decent employments for both our sons, paying heavy bribes. We were happy thinking we could enjoy our retirement. But today we are deserted. Looking after one’s parents has been the family tradition for generations. What happened to my children? Or was anything wrong with our parenting? Is this the result of our bad karma? What does the Lord want from us?’ The chief had no answers to these questions, but he hastened to process Shila’s loan application.¹

Aging in Early Vedic Times

The questions posed by Shila compel us to review the status of the aged in Indian society across the centuries. Were the old in India always in such predicament, or are we witnessing a shift in priorities in Indian society? To understand the evolution of traditions associated with old age we need to over-

view Indian society from Vedic times.

A survey of Vedic literature shows us that old age was welcomed by contemporary society.² With the threat of natural calamities and diseases always lurking around, humans of the Vedic period often had their lives cut short well before the cherished hundred years. Given the limitations of the social structure, civic amenities, and knowledge resources then available, illnesses and injuries—from wars, accidents, or animals and insects—took a heavy toll on human lives. Everyone prayed that they might live longer, get to see their grandchildren, and encounter death only late in life. Their desire was to live life to its fullness, enjoy the company of successive generations of offspring, and die only after attaining old age. Old age was glorified and the sick were blessed that they could recover and die natural deaths. A prayer on behalf of a sick person in the Atharva Veda says, ‘Unto old age do I commit you [the sick]; unto old age do I instigate you; may old age, excellent, conduct you; let the other deaths go away, which they call the remaining hundred.’³ Thus old age was something to be happy about and not a cause of fear, since to live longer was considered a sign of vitality and good luck rather than a struggle with the failing body and its associated ailments.

We find various poetic descriptions of aging and subsequent death in the Vedas. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* portrays old age as a boatman carrying individual souls to the other shore, death.⁴ A hymn from the Atharva Veda presents death as something that permeates every moment of human life. This hymn seeks blessings for the journey from birth to old age and death.⁵

People in the early Vedic era spent their relatively short lives in education and subsequent management of their households. Retirement was

not contemplated, and it was considered a great blessing if one could continue living well after one's children were married. The system of four ashramas—including retirement into contemplative life in the forest, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa—seems to have become regularized only in Upanishadic times and may have signified a longer and more stable life.

From Yearning to Fear

With advances in general social life and medical knowledge, the late Vedic era probably witnessed an increase in the average lifespan, which is reflected in the development of the system of four ashramas. The average human life was now divided into the phases of education, Brahmacharya, household life, Grihastha, retirement to forest for contemplation, Vanaprastha, and renunciation or mendicancy, Sannyasa. Ethical manuals called Dharmashastras laid down the general rules for each phase of life. Old age, which in early Vedic times was a period to be cherished, became an object of fear—a reminder of the impermanence of life and the ensuing death. It was the time for renouncing worldly life and preparing for death. Ways to eliminate or transcend the suffering caused by old age were actively sought. Meditation and contemplation on the ephemeral nature of the world were prescribed, even as endeavours to overcome aging and death were undertaken.

The people of the post-Vedic era were advised to spend the latter part of their lives in retirement, contemplating the perishable nature of the human body, and pursuing the higher realities of life. At this stage a person was expected to renounce enjoyments of the senses. The materialists were of course of the view that one should enjoy sense pleasures till one is exhausted. However, the famous anecdote of King Yayati occurring in the Bhagavata emphasizes the futility of this approach and asserts that the best way to transcend the snares of the senses is to give up sense enjoyment.⁶

According to Vedic tradition the body is an instrument that the soul uses to exhaust its karma, the accumulated effects of past actions. Birth and

death are but phases in the perpetual transmigratory cycle of existence. This cycle of birth and death goes on till all the effects of an individual soul's actions are exhausted or neutralized. This is liberation, moksha. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* says, 'The individual soul, considering itself and the Controller as different, revolves in this great Wheel of Brahman that is the sustenance of all and the place of dissolution of all. When (one's Self) is adored as (identified with) It (the Supreme), one attains immortality.'⁷ The realization of one's identity with the Power driving this cycle is the way to come out of it. Hence, according to the Vedas, aging and death do not mean the decay or destruction of the embodied entity. In the natural process of evolution of thought, post-Vedic society gave a pronounced metaphysical dimension to aging. In a sense, the average human being started fearing the arrival of old age, in contrast to the yearning for it seen in the early Vedic era.

Early Geriatric Medicine in India

Aging has several aspects to it. It is most manifest in the physical body. Ayurveda is a traditional system of medicine which deals with the general principles of human health from a typically Indian viewpoint. Therefore, to get an idea of the ancient Indian understanding of aging we need to go through the principal Ayurvedic texts: *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*. It is interesting to note that, several centuries prior to the development of modern medicine, these texts contained highly developed concepts of geriatrics harmoniously interwoven with Vedic metaphysical ideas. For instance, the idea that a soul gets embodied to exhaust the actions of past births is also found in Ayurvedic texts, which state that 'life is a productive and dynamic aggregate of sense organs, mind, body, and self, held together and maintained over a definite period of time by the power of karma performed in previous lives'.⁸

According to Ayurveda, the human body is supported and sustained by three humours which are derived from three basic elements: *kapha*, from

water; *pitta*, from fire; and *vata*, from wind. These humours originate from the food eaten, digested, and assimilated by us. The humours of the body have a macrocosmic dimension also, as detailed by Sushruta: 'Just as the moon, sun, and wind uphold the world by their action of release, absorption, and dissemination respectively, even so do *kapha*, *pitta*, and *vata* act with regard to the body.'⁹ The balance or imbalance of these humours cause good or ill health respectively. These humours are always changing, depending upon the person's activity and the environment lived in. Human beings are sustained by the nutrient fluid produced by the action of the three humours, and this fluid needs to be preserved with great care. The humours are responsible for both the physical and psychic health of an individual. Maintaining proper balance of these three humours was the major concern of health care in ancient times. However, aging was inevitable even then.

Aging begins just after birth. The initial years of growth and development of the body camouflage this aging process, which becomes manifest only when one starts to weaken physically. According to Charaka, aging is a gradual process and brings with it certain geriatric ailments which have no remedy. These are to be taken as signs of impending death. The process of aging has been vividly described in Ayurvedic texts. According to Sushruta, 'after the age of seventy, with each passing day, the seven bodily elements, sense organs, energy, vitality, and enthusiasm undergo a significant decline giving rise to wrinkled skin, grey hair, baldness, chronic cough, and shortness of breath. The aging individual's capacity to perform all kinds of functions gets progressively reduced. Eventually, the person goes under, like an old home giving in after a heavy downpour.'¹⁰ The psychological symptoms of aging have also been detailed by the medical practitioners of ancient India.

Human beings have always wanted to overcome aging and to live as long as possible. But eternal life in the human body has eluded them. Ancient systems of medicine are believed to have contained

Ayurvedic
physician,
vaidya,
examining
a patient's pulse



keys to delay greying. Today we know that Ayurveda prescribes methods to delay the aging process. Longevity has also been explored in Ayurvedic texts. Ayurvedic practitioners would examine the newborn for signs of longevity. To delay the process of aging and overcome ailments born of old age, they prescribed rejuvenation therapy or *ras-ayana* and revitalization or *vajikarana*. They are the ancient Indian equivalents of modern preventive geriatrics. The main principle behind these therapies is that a systematic synthesis of appropriate food, *ahara*, and balanced lifestyle, *vihara*, will lead to the rejuvenation of vigour, *vaja* or *ojas*, of the body. Certain natural substances were identified as potential aids in rejuvenation which could considerably compensate for the wasting the body suffers due to old age.

In keeping with traditional Indian philosophy, Charaka says that moderation is the key to longevity. The body is compared to a vehicle: just as a vehicle properly used wears out gradually but may break its axle if driven carelessly, similarly the body will last longer if used judiciously but will perish early if misused. Frittering away one's vital energies leads to physical decline, speeding up the aging process. A disciplined life with adherence to personal hygiene



Medieval Ayurvedic physician at work

was therefore considered important. Charaka defines old age as the period between sixty and one hundred years. It is interesting that the time of onset of old age as specified by this ancient physician coincides with the age for retirement prescribed by the government of almost all countries.

Rejuvenation therapy may produce remarkable results in recovering the vitality of an aging body and mind. It removes fatigue, mitigates weakness, improves digestion, enhances vigour, and improves skin lustre. The body is purified by cleansing the intestines thoroughly and removing impurities from the circulation. In addition to physical purification, these therapies also include chanting of Vedic hymns and the practice of silence, meditation, and contemplation. Thus, the process of rejuvenation is holistic, revitalizing both body and mind. Application of special medicinal oils and dietary hygiene are part of rejuvenation therapy. Even today this form of Ayurvedic therapy is very popular and attracts people from all over the globe to India.

Present-day Health Care for the Aged Indian

Shila's plight is a reflection of the many problems faced by aged women in contemporary India, where specialized geriatric medical care remains a rarity. Even in hospitals with independent departments for care of the elderly, only the economi-

cally privileged few are able to afford these facilities. Traditional systems of medicine like Ayurveda are also very expensive, and the providers of these facilities are more interested in serving 'medical tourists' coming from abroad than catering to the needs of their fellow countrymen. In rural India the old are still taken care of within the family, but urban India is witnessing a displacement of older members to different institutions, old-age homes in particular. The Indian medical system is yet to come to terms with the large

number of households in the country which are not equipped to provide adequate nursing care for their elder members, with some of those families even unwilling to undertake such care. Government hospitals attend to the aged only if they are ill. Though Ayurveda considers old age itself a disease and though the physiological complexities of old age call for special medical care, an average senior citizen in India gets nothing but salutatory respect from Indian medical institutions. Even with a growing number of NGOs coming forward to support the cause of the aged, it still remains to be seen whether society will respond to this problem by providing proper care to the elderly within the family set-up, or whether government and private enterprises will intervene and provide better institutional health care facilities for the elderly. The likes of Shila need to wait till then.

The Social Dimension

With a shift in traditional familial roles, the aged find their activities curtailed, which in turn leads to a feeling of not being wanted by family and society. In the past joint family structures in India allowed the aged to remain an integral part of the family and act as guides to successive generations as well, handing over valuable family knowledge and social traditions. This gave them a useful engagement, and the parenting duties of their immediate off-

spring were also shared. In the process, childhood and old age—both phases of life requiring abundant personal attention—came in close contact. Even a few decades ago Indian society did not consider the aged a burden, but treated them as valued keepers of tradition deserving respect and care. The increase in nuclear families, a consequence of the rapidly changing cosmopolitan nature of jobs, moved the elderly from an adored position to one of a fringe group that had to be somehow tolerated. This paved the way for old-age homes. Children too are now kept very busy by the demands of curricular and non-curricular education imposed on them by a highly demanding society; they have no time to sit and learn from the generation that brought up their parents.

With the 'de-traditionalization' of society old age is no more a hallowed institution. The culture of old-age homes is not prevalent in rural areas, but urban India is rapidly opting for the convenience of dumping its senior citizens in institutional care facilities. Though not considered proper in the Indian tradition, separation of ailing elders from one's home is today seen as an action, both pragmatic and essential, for coping with escalating social demands. Tumultuous changes in urban Indian lifestyle have only accentuated such perceptions. For instance, the daily routine, or the lack of it, of the average youth can only shock their grandparents. Instead of rethinking the nature of this cultural shift, society prefers to take the path of least resistance: avoiding or neglecting the previous generation.

Overall health care in India has improved over the years and consequently the population of the aged is steadily increasing. But the country is ill-prepared to provide for the elderly segment of its population. There is no systematic welfare programme for the aged and they are largely left to themselves. The old are expected to only lead a religious life without much participation in social activities. Notwithstanding that this trend is due to the cultural inheritance from Vedic times, such an attitude does not always allow the aged to cultivate diverse interests to quell their boredom. More-

over, even when elderly people go on pilgrimage they find it difficult to access the amenities needed for alleviating their physical strain. The provisions made for taking care of the special facilities the aged require during travel are still rather rudimentary.

In India aging and the elderly have generally been looked at from the male perspective. The problems specific to women—aggravated by the fact that they usually outlive their husbands, who are their principal financial support—have never been properly addressed from a feminine perspective. Old age for a typical Indian woman turns out to be a mere extension of her subordination to a patriarchal society. With bodies failing and household activities nearly absent, elderly couples feel the need for close emotional understanding extending beyond the physical plane. In a largely orthodox patriarchal set-up this often becomes difficult.

Problems brought about by the dynamically evolving cultural ethos of Indian society are being addressed by specialized research institutes. Many universities have started courses focusing on the problems of aging and the aged with specific reference to the Indian situation. While it may take several years for these studies to find practical application, society as a whole needs to take steps to make sure that this issue does not get out of control, as it has occurred in countries like China where caring for the aged population has turned into a major crisis. Retirement plans for the old should not only be economically oriented but ought also to address the inevitable lifestyle changes required of the elderly.

Though in the government of India there are separate departments for women and children, there is no specialized department for senior citizens; their needs are presently addressed by the department of social justice and empowerment. In 1999 the government formulated a 'National Policy for Older Persons'. Various schemes were undertaken in pursuance of this policy. These include:

Strengthening of primary health care system to enable it to meet the health care needs of older

persons; training and orientation to medical and paramedical personnel in health care of the elderly; promotion of the concept of healthy aging; assistance to societies for production and distribution of material on geriatric care; provision of separate queues and reservation of beds for elderly patients in hospitals; extended coverage under the Antyodaya Scheme with emphasis on provision of food at subsidized rates for the benefit of older persons, especially the destitute and marginalized sections.¹¹

Nevertheless, the concerned executive agencies need to ensure greater penetration of these policies at grass-roots level to be of real use to society.

Financial Security

The question of financial security in old age bothers everyone, even the youth. People save large sums of money, purchase real estate and gold, and invest in stocks and shares to ensure that they need not depend on others for their daily needs when old. In spite of all these precautions, it is seen that a minor fluctuation in their cash reserves entails lots of problems for the aged. The elderly often get adequate care and respect only if they have money to spend. Table I below gives an idea of the economic independence of the aged in India as reported by the 'NSS Fifty-second Round: July 1995–June 1996', published by the National Sample Survey Organization, Department of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Programme Implementation, Government of India, Calcutta, in 1998.

This table brings out the striking disparity in the economic freedom enjoyed by the elderly male and female populace of India. About half of the aged male population seems to be financially independent, as against a meagre 11–12 per cent of females. The government of India offers many financial benefits to the aged, including income-tax rebates, old-age pension, additional bank interest, and railway and air fare concessions.¹² Still the majority of the elderly do not see themselves as financially independent.

Wealth can bring additional problems for the

aged, rendering them more vulnerable to burglar attacks, constant demands from relatives, and litigation. The Indian government needs to develop

Table I: State of Economic Independence of the Elderly in India
(per cent of people aged above sixty)¹³

State of Economic Independence	Male		Female	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Not dependent on others	48.5	51.5	12.1	11.5
Partially dependent on others	18.0	16.9	14.6	11.0
Fully dependent on others	31.3	29.7	70.6	75.7
Not recorded	2.2	1.9	2.6	1.8

special mechanisms for handling litigations involving the aged. The recent killings of retired people for money in posh residential localities of the national and state capitals are matters of serious concern. Such incidents snatch away the mental peace of old people and bring home to us the helpless situation of the elderly in urban India. All the same, financial freedom is essential for proper sustenance, security, and health in old age. Everyone ought to be prepared for old age by saving sufficiently, if one is to avoid Shila's financial predicament.

Embracing Old Age and Death

At the dawn of our lives, with the effulgent rising sun of vitality and vigour bringing with it distant beauties and promises veiled by the mist of expectation and inviting us to uncover them, we are totally unprepared for old age and death. With a refreshing feeling in our minds and a 'can do everything' spirit, we plunge into activity amidst the happy chimes of life's small joys. About midway through our lives, with heavy responsibilities to shoulder and lots of dreams yet to be fulfilled, we console ourselves thinking that there is just a little more to be done before one can rest. We seek occasional retreats and come back to work with renewed vigour.

Even then, we seldom seriously consider the possibility of greying and dying.

In the evening of our lives the end is very palpable. The setting sun of our strength forces us to go through repeated reviews of the days that were. With no power to alter the past and very little say in the matters of the present, we resign ourselves to fate, or more precisely, to time. We feel like shouting out loud and warning the succeeding generations: 'Be careful! Time is cruel! Make use of it when you do have the support of your body. Learn from our mistakes.' But our voice does not seem to reach out to the multitudes out there.

Our life is full of days marked by rising expectations, in chasing them, and tiring in our chase. In this entire hullabaloo we are left unprepared for the end. The one thing certain in all life, all processes, all cycles, and all material objects is the end: destruction, death. However factual this truth may be, it is ironical that we want to find certitude in all other things than the only thing which is in reality certain—our death. Replying to the questions posed by the Yaksha, Yudhishtira famously said that though we constantly see people dying, we very easily forget that we too will die—that is the greatest surprise. By some inconceivable logic we consider ourselves above such mortal laws! This is equally true of aging.

What should we do then? Contemplate death; remind ourselves of our end at every moment; despair of a doomed existence? Far from that. We need to constantly remind ourselves how we have to accomplish a lot in a limited time. It is also a good reason why we should find ways to transcend death. In the past many have trodden this path and have actually transcended death. People with devotional temperament can connect every moment of their life to their Chosen Ideal. They can constantly chant the name of God and convert their lives into an incessant prayer. Those inclined towards the non-dual Advaita can dwell in the consciousness of the Self, the Atman, non-different from the one Brahman. And for one not professing any faith, life should be treated as an opportunity for as many

constructive and creative acts as possible, redeemed by being of help to fellow beings. Moreover, life could be a conduit for spreading the message of love to one and all.

Though society needs to help Shila undo the injustice heaped on her, she would also have to reconcile herself to her sons' behaviour. But in Krishna, her Chosen Deity, she has a companion who would not fail her. Thinking of him brings her solace, and by means of this constant recollection she can hope to be united with him in life as well as in death.

Let our lives be a preparation for old age. Let our lives be spent in getting fulfilled and sharing this fulfilment with others. Let us train our bodies and minds to be stable at all times—in prosperity and adversity, in good health and ill health, in happiness and misery—by practising a measure of detachment. Then, on reaching old age, we would not be afraid of embracing death. Let us be prepared to welcome death. We would then smile at death with the full knowledge that it is only a passing phase which cannot destroy us, which cannot destroy the lives we have fruitfully spent. We may not be earthly realities tomorrow but our lives would definitely have left an indelible mark on some minds which will continue to live.



Notes and References

1. This anecdote is based on a true incident.
2. See Shrinivas Tilak, *Religion and Aging in the Indian Tradition* (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1997), 16.
3. Atharva Veda, 3.11.7.
4. *Shatapatha Brahmana*, 2.3.3.15.
5. Atharva Veda, 8.1.
6. Bhagavata, 9.19.14.
7. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 1.6.
8. *Charaka Samhita*, 'Sutrasthana', 1.42; 'Sharirasthana', 1.53.
9. *Sushruta Samhita*, 'Sutrasthana', 21.8.
10. Ibid., 'Sutrasthana', 35.29.
11. <http://india.gov.in/citizen/senior_citizen/policies_schemes.php> accessed 23 January 2009.
12. <<http://socialjustice.nic.in/social/sdcop/benefits.htm>> accessed 23 January 2009.
13. Ashish Bose and Mala Kapur Shankardass, *Growing Old in India—Voices Reveal, Statistics Speak* (Delhi: B R Publishing, 2004), 337.

A Journey through Life

Dr Dipak Sengupta

IT was evening, and I was waiting for the Mumbai mail at Howrah station. I had arrived a little early and had some two hours to kill. Time was moving slowly at the Wheelers and other book stalls. To spend thirty-six hours alone in a train I would need some reading material. I started glancing through some Bengali magazines—it is easier for me, at my age, to read Bengali type in the dim light of the train compartment. As I browsed, a few names passed through: *Unish–Kuri* (Nineteen–Twenty), a magazine for late teenagers; *Sukhi Grihakone* (Happy Family), for the newly married; *Nay–Dash* (Nine–Ten) for secondary examinees; *Sananda*, for women; *Anandalok*, a Bollywood/Tollywood cinema news magazine; *Suswasthya*, for the younger generation. *Desh* was once my favourite magazine, but I did not enjoy the novels and stories recently published—too much of sex and extramarital affairs, the characters were just not known to me, and even the articles appeared stale. It was frustrating to note that all the magazines were for the younger generation; nothing for the aged. Do we not belong to society any more? Are we outcasts? When writers grow old, do they continue writing about the love affairs and sex of younger people? Irritated, I left for the platform.

I had booked my ticket three months ago at a computerized booking counter in order to get a lower berth. These days people book tickets online, through computers, paying with credit cards. I could not imagine myself tinkering with a computer. Indian Railways assured us that senior citizens would get lower berths, but this is not always the case in reality—hence the trip to the reservation office. Lower berth is a must for me; with arthritic knees like mine climbing to the upper birth requires the grace of Bhagavan Krishna, who alone can ‘make the lame man cross mountains’—old age itself is a disease.

I must admit that I have always got help from younger boys present in the compartment, who help me make my bed or set my luggage in place. Some of them even exchange their lower berth with my upper one, without even being requested. I have always been their ‘kaka’, uncle—let a few years pass and I will be their ‘dadu’, grandfather.

As the train picked up speed, the noise in the compartment gradually subsided. Everybody was settling down. I was already under a blanket. Soon the lights would be switched off. It was so much more comfortable now. I belong to the steam-engine age: the dusty smoke would irritate one’s eyes and I would often be thrashed by my mother for keeping the window open; but the window would remain open all the same. There was so much fun for such a small price—the trees would move faster than the crops in the fields and the blooming lotuses in the ponds. Third class sleeper coaches used to have wooden benches and we had to carry our own bedding. There used to be a contrivance called holdall—aptly named. Newer generations probably have not seen one. What a change the railways have undergone in the last twenty years; the computerized reservation system and moderately priced air-conditioned coaches are two developments that have made travelling much less of a bother. We do not have to carry our bedding any more—it is now provided, pressed and packed. The only complaint I have is that in the air-conditioned coaches the fleeting sceneries through the windows are no longer there. Window panes are always so murky. Some of the other fond childhood experiences—like watching hawkers trying to sell tea and cigarettes with cries of *cha garam* or *pan-biri-cigret* in the dead of night or strolling lazily on the empty platforms of small stations—are now mere memories.

A Wagonload of Problems

I started my career in the early sixties as a coal-mine manager. The mine happened to be on the main Howrah–Delhi railway line. I used to stand on the coal dumps by the railway track and watch the wagons go by. Every wagon was marked with return dates on the top left corner—07-08-65, 08-02-68, 02-03-72, and so on. I used to play a game, guessing where I would be when the wagon returned home. Many times the wagons went back to the workshop for overhaul. Some of them might have been scrapped and melted. I was still moving on, without repair, waiting to be scrapped at any time. I did not know how long I would have to wait.

Newspaper at Bilaspur station—but I was really missing a Bengali magazine. A thought flashed in my mind: why not publish one—it could be named *Sattar–Ashi* (Seventy–Eighty), for like minded people. I started composing the magazine mentally. A section on health and nutrition would fit in well: what and how much to eat, suggestions on exercise or yoga for the aged, and the like. Some social issues and spiritual pieces would also be appropriate. A few short stories or reprints from our times might be liked too. And of course, financial issues and advice, always very important for retired folks who live on savings only. We retired with a handsome package, but within ten or fifteen years our bank balance would be dwindling. You still have quite a few years to live, and more so your wife. Investment in right accounts becomes vital. If a person has a mental inclination like mine, debit and credit would not make much sense. To me investment was always an intriguing problem. I know what my savings are and the interest they accrue. So, apparently, I should be able to know how much I can spend every year and what luxury I can afford. But a big ‘if’ is always there. All realistic calculations hinge upon my knowing when I am going to die. That uncertainty kills me every time I attempt my financial planning. Above all, there is a constant threat of some serious ailment befalling at any time. I have to be prepared for that as well. As a result I may die either as a pauper or with a hefty bank bal-

ance. Such uncertainty is very disconcerting.

Linked to this is a topic too big to be discussed here in detail: health insurance. As you grow old your insurance company becomes reluctant to renew your medical insurance. I knew a man in his seventies who forgot to renew his health insurance for a year, and when he wanted to renew it again, was denied the facility. An aged person needs advice on such matters.

After addressing some peripheral, though not less important, issues we can now rethink one of the basic questions of old age: what does one do after retiring at the age of sixty or sixty-five? One may continue doing similar jobs for a few more years and somehow ignore the problems of aging, as if there were still many more years to come. There is a saying in a Buddhist scripture: ‘You see the past as short, future infinitely long.’ But as dusk approaches, one starts feeling pain in the joints and is suddenly reminded of the existence of the skeletal frame, which unlike the soul can be burnt by fire, drenched by water, and dried by wind. The body has been rightly compared to a ragged dress. Even travelling by bus becomes a nuisance; everybody younger—including the conductor, who may suggest you try the next bus—pities you. Most state governments are yet to introduce reserved seats for senior citizens, as has been done in Mumbai. There are many other inconveniences of bus travels for the aged—you may be subjected to catcalls, for instance. We have to create our own shield to resist such external disturbances.

The Vanaprastha Way

The Smritis have a definite suggestion for the third age: go and live in the woods—a system of life termed ‘Vanaprastha.’ According to Manu, when a householder sees that he has developed wrinkles and his hair has turned grey, when he has seen the children of his children, he should take to forest life. He may take his wife along with him, if she is willing. Otherwise she may stay back with her children. The forest dweller is to cover himself with rags or the bark of trees and obtain no more food than is necessary for subsistence, through begging or

collection of roots and fruits. These, together with the prescription of some other ritualistic duties, make this kind of life too harsh for modern men and women, who may see it as a formula for quick death. And if an old man still attempts it, the forest department would drive him out in no time.

The *Manu Smriti* has devoted a number of shlokas to advise children on how to treat teachers, parents, and brahmanas with love and respect. Mistreating parents was considered an offence calling for expiation. Chandrakirti, a Buddhist philosopher, had an explanation for mistreatment of old parents: 'Sons cause troubles hundreds of time and are remiss in acknowledging past favours. Because the greater share of love goes to their own sons, they forget the past and ignore their fathers at the same time, just as if their fathers were strangers.'

Pitamaha Bhishma's advice is more like a grandfather's. When the householder has his house full of children and grandchildren and his happiness is at its peak, he should detach himself from the family. The third quarter of his life is to be lived as a Vanaprastha. Whenever one finds old age taking over the body, one should hand over all assets to one's sons and live a life totally disengaged from family and social affairs. The householder may take shelter in the woods to spend time in religious thoughts. A Vanaprastha can have savings for a day, for a month, for a year, or even for twelve years, though this last is meant for hospitality and rituals—I am sure Bhishma would not mind if we use it for our own sustenance too. In those days it was thought proper to take to Vanaprastha around the age of fifty. So savings for twelve years was considered enough for the rest of one's life. The age for retirement today is sixty; assuming that life expectancy has increased significantly and given that inflation is a major problem, saving for twenty years is mandatory.

Bhishma never took to Vanaprastha. Lying on the bed of arrows and waiting for death, he must have thought that it would have been better for him to leave his family for the woods at the peak of his happy times—when all the children of the family were growing up well, when Acharya Drona was

training them in weaponry and Bhishma himself was the master of the family, the kingdom, and the dynasty. The rest of his life was largely one of sorrow. He had to witness his grandsons' wife being insulted in public by her own brother-in-law, even as he stood helpless. And the ultimate family feud was the cruellest cut of all, which forced him to take up arms against his favourite grandsons. All this unbearable suffering was only due to his staying too long with his family. That is the curse of old age.

So what would you do in old age? Would you choose to live in your son's family? Even if you contribute to the family income, you are no longer the master of the family. Your son gets all priority and care. Your opinion becomes secondary. This may not happen if your son chooses to stay with you along with his family; you may remain the master, but with extra burden and responsibility. You are expected to act like the father of the family, handle all day-to-day problems. Your wife would be looking after the kitchen for the extended family. This would be a twenty-four-hour job. You might like to have your own free time for readings, hobbies, or a simple mid-morning nap. All this would also come to an end. If you have enough financial resources you may afford a man Friday, otherwise you have to live in an extended family where the rest of the members would be moving at a different pace; you would have to adjust to the generation gap. An alternative is coming up these days: comfortable, hotel-like old-age homes in decent areas for parents of non-resident Indians (NRIs). This may be a good system, provided any of your children is an NRI, and cares for you.

The Journey Continues

Nagpur station. I came out for a stroll on the platform. Railway platforms all over India are a world in themselves: hosts of people sitting, chatting, eating, running, and even sleeping; from the meticulously dressed business executive to the urchin in rags; a few men cooking at one end of the station—every group seems to have a separate zone and keeps a respectable distance from each other.

I walked up and down the length of the train,

observing that the passengers were mostly young. Old people were disproportionately few in number. Considering the financial limitations of senior citizens, the Indian Railways offers them concessional tickets. Still the number of seniors was small. Was it due to their physical inability to travel? Or did they deliberately avoid coming out into the crowd? As it would not be possible for me to jump on to a running bus or train any more, I returned to my compartment. This incapability of old age was one that I hated most. A poem by a well-known Kolkata poet came to mind:

Can you wrestle and jostle your way up inside,
Then hang from a strap,
take the mad crush in stride?
If not, then Kolkata's trams you relinquish,
And walk through the streets,
lost, sore, and foolish.

A new passenger had occupied the opposite berth. I noticed some more change of faces. Language took a turn from largely Bengali to Hindi. The train picked up speed, so did the new passenger's conversation. He was a pleasant talker, and in no time I came to know his life story. I thought he was older than me, but he turned out to be of my own age. I could not imagine I looked so old. I felt sad.

The gentleman was a Maharashtrian living in Nagpur. He had a nice house there and being a widower lived alone under the care of a full-time attendant, whose cooking, he reported with a mischievous smile, was better than his departed wife's. But he felt very lonely and missed her all the time. His son refused to settle in Nagpur; instead he was living in Mumbai with his wife and two children. Theirs was such a small apartment that, the gentleman confessed, he would never feel comfortable there. At times during our chat he failed to suppress his displeasure and irritation. The son was so busy and tired that he could hardly talk to him. His only solace was his grandchildren. But they too were so burdened with their school, homework, and tutors that they had little time to play or listen to stories. Moreover, how could he compete with their 'Cartoon Network' on TV or their computer

games. The poor man hated the whole atmosphere, but again, he missed them so much that he made it a point to pay them a visit once a month or so. He was not sure whether he was welcome there. Both the son and his wife were so urbane that it was difficult to fathom their feelings from their behaviour. They were hooked to a chaotic mix of pollution, fast food, rush, and noise—Nagpur was so peaceful. I felt sorry for my co-passenger, not because his son could not or would not come to Nagpur, but because of his loneliness and lack of purpose in life. I could feel it; he had to vent his emotions to a total stranger in such un-homely surroundings.

I looked through the window and saw the paradox of life—the sunset was so beautiful, throwing red streaks on grey clouds. But to us the end always brings a feeling of gloom.

It became dark outside. The compartment was flushed with light. I was flipping through the pages of an English magazine I borrowed from the young man on the upper bunk. There was nothing of interest to me in any of its topics. In my younger days I used to be obsessed with all these issues, taking sides and arguing with friends. Nothing of that seems to matter now. On the long journey of life I left those things by the wayside. The gentleman, who was talking all through the evening, suddenly became quiet. He was staring vacantly into the darkness outside. His face was reflected on the window pane. I was melancholically toying with the old man's dilemma, whose name was not even clear to me—these problems are so common among older people.

The Film of Life

From that contemplation my mind drifted to some excellent characterization of aged people in Bengali literature. The first one that came to my mind was Indir Thakrun in *Pather Panchali* (The Ballad of the Road). The character was superbly portrayed in the novel, no doubt, but it was Satyajit Ray's film that really immortalized her. Indir Thakrun, with her brass pot and some torn clothes, fitted perfectly into the Bengali society of her time. You do not feel any pity for her because she blended so well with

the environment. Sarvajaya, her distant cousin's wife, had some harsh words for her, but there was no malice or cruelty in their relationship; they shared a common poverty. Indir Thakrun reminded me of my grandmother. Why only me, she probably presented a similar picture to the minds of all of my generation. My grandmother was a widow. She had a separate kitchen and used to have one meal a day. Though she was a strict vegetarian, her cooking was heavenly. We would sit around her during her mealtime, in spite of my mother's scoldings, and wait for a scoop to be loosely dropped on to our extended palms. When young, she used to be a Gandhian in her village and was famous for leading processions and picketing liquor shops. She also took the lead in burning British clothes. In the last year of her life she could not remember anything and my mother used to feed her. What a fall from grace.

Gautama Buddha is supposed to have said of old age:

Age makes attractive bodies unattractive.
 Age takes away one's dignity, strength, and power.
 Age takes away pleasures and makes one
 an object of contempt.
 Age deprives one of vitality, and age kills.

In Satyajit Ray's films we saw two retired, though not so old, fathers. Both of them had problems in coping with the modern-day environment. One of them appears in the film *Simabaddha* (The Confined), in which the father comes to his son's house and enters his drawing room unannounced. His son is having a party which he has himself thrown to celebrate his promotion as a CEO. Almost everybody, including some of the ladies, has a wine glass in hand. Both the father and the son are embarrassed. The camera captured the father's shock very effectively. The other film, *Jana Aranya* (The Forest of People), shows two sons living with their father in their paternal home. The father has problems accepting the culture of bribing in business deals; he is especially upset when the elder brother advises the younger not to have scruples in this regard, insisting, while dining together, that bribing

was present throughout Indian history. The father is upset and leaves his dinner unfinished. These are very common incidents in present-day family life.

Aged people are generally cast in supporting roles in movies. But I remembered a Hindi film, *Baghban*, in which aged parents were in lead roles. The story revolved around the parents' problem in getting shelter with their sons. All the sons refused to provide them a place in their homes. At one point the parents start living separately with two sons. But as generally happens in Hindi films, it all ended well on a sweet and emotional note. Older persons are portrayed in contemporary literature and films in largely stereotyped ways: lonely, incompatible with the present generation, facing financial and health problems.

The End?

When we are young we are indifferent to the world around us and consider old-age problems as something that would never happen to us. For many, to talk about old age is depressing: 'Think young and you will be young.' But alas, this body refuses to obey such commands indefinitely. It withers away. Again, a few lines from a Buddhist scripture:

You like long life
 But dislike old age.
 Alas! Your conduct seems right
 [Only] to a person like you.

I had the good fortune of travelling through the Himalayas for a month with a monk of the Ramakrishna Order. We crossed many rope-bridges hanging over deep gorges of rivers like the Alakananda and the Mandakini. One day, while we were midway upon one such bridge, the swami told me that these sites were called Bhṛigu Patana. Sannyasins tired of living would come to such heights and drop themselves into the gorge below after fixing their minds in meditation. I liked the idea and thought it to be the best way of leaving this world. But these days most of these places are guarded by the military so that no one commits suicide there. People may call it suicide, but to me it is liberation. (Continued on page 300)

Healthy Aging

Dr Bithi Sircar

May we see a hundred autumns, may we live a hundred autumns, may we wake a hundred autumns, may we ascend a hundred autumns, may we prosper a hundred autumns, may we be a hundred autumns, may we adorn a hundred autumns, more autumns than a hundred.

—Atharva Veda, 19.67.

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

—Psalms 90.10.

THOUGH several millennia have elapsed since the Vedic rishis and the Hebrew psalmists articulated the above thoughts, our predicament curiously remains the same. Death is a certainty, whether it be at seventy or a hundred. What concerns us, as intensely as it did the sages of yore, is not so much the natural limit of longevity, but the harnessing of strength to live up to that age peacefully and happily. Aging is now a global issue. The UN General Assembly declared 1999 as the 'International Year of Older Persons'. And the Government of India declared 2000 as the 'National Year for Older Persons'.

The problems of the aged in India have been deliberated upon from ancient times, as testified by the Smriti texts and the Mahabharata. But these problems were never as complex and serious as they are today. In a predominantly agricultural society, which India is even today, land traditionally belonged to all members of the family and possession followed the hereditary *parampara* or lineage. In this system food is produced by means of the physical labour of the younger members—aided by the knowledge of the elders—and is enough to meet the basic necessities of life. Since the aged are the storehouse of traditional knowledge, including trade secrets, they are as important to the system as its younger members. The extended family fits in perfectly with the environ-

ment, with everyone contributing something to the family and the community. On the other hand, the nuclear family is a product of industrialization, a period in which traditional knowledge apparently lost its importance. Today, cultivation is controlled by agro-labs and government agencies. Even household remedies dispensed by grandmothers have been replaced by modern over-the-counter medicines. In such a situation the aged gradually become a liability and are considered problematic by the younger members of the family. Their contribution to society in general and to the contemporary family ambience in particular is easily forgotten.

The younger generation cannot be blamed for upsetting traditional social structures. Increase in life expectancy has resulted in a decline in the relative proportion of earning members in society. People above sixty currently represent around ten per cent of the total world population, and this proportion is expected to increase to twenty per cent by 2050. This would have considerable economic and social impact, especially in countries with low income. It is not merely the basic sustenance of the extended family that constitutes a substantial economic burden, diseases and disabilities that the elderly are particularly susceptible to add to the problem.

The Process of Aging

Old age is definitely not a disease in itself, but aging beyond a point is accompanied by significant physiological changes which render the body susceptible to certain diseases and disabilities. The pattern and sequence of these changes are the same for all, but the rate at which these changes occur differs significantly from person to person—the speed of decline being proportional to one's physical fitness and emotional stability. Therefore, one must work on

these factors much before the actual onset of decay. Death is inevitable, but the last days of life can be made happy and peaceful if one plans for them.

Aging initiates structural and functional changes at tissue and cellular levels. According to an influential theory of aging, the longevity of tissues is genetically determined—with cells undergoing apoptosis or programmed cell death in the end. There is a progressive decline in tissue function with aging. As a result, vital organs—brain, heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, among others—tend to lose efficiency with age. The decline in the digestive system is commonly noticed and, though by no means serious, can be a cause of irritation. It is frustrating to find things that we gobbled up like gluttons when young causing indigestion and stomach ache in old age. The intestinal musculature turns sluggish and there is some decline in enzyme activity, which together cause constipation and intolerance to certain foods. Potentially more serious is the failure to properly absorb such nutrients as calcium and vitamin B₁₂, and also the decrease in the activity of liver enzymes.

The Brain · A small proportion of brain cells are lost with advancing age. But the remaining cells have the ability to establish new connections, which, coupled with the brain's large functional reserve, helps preserve cognitive capacities. If they remain fit and well, older people do not lose the ability to remember, learn, think, and reason. But a major loss of brain cells, due to genetic factors, reduced blood flow, or as yet unknown causes may lead to dementia—a progressive and irreversible global decline in higher brain function that robs people of the ability to remember, think, understand, communicate, and control behaviour. As dementia has potentially devastating consequences, research on delaying or preventing it is of central importance to public health policy for the elderly.

Depression often coexists with dementia. However, it is useful to distinguish between depression as a manifestation of dementia and a true depressive state without underlying structural brain disorder. Depression occurs frequently among the medically ill elderly population. Unfortunately, depression in

the elderly is often attributed to the aging process and no intervention is undertaken, although effective antidepressant therapies are available.

It is generally accepted that dementia and depression have strong genetic bases. Nevertheless, since gene expression is greatly influenced by environmental factors, nutritional status, intake of toxic substances, and presence of other pathologies, care must be taken to address these. Higher plasma levels of vitamins and micronutrients may have a beneficial effect on brain function, whereas alcohol in large amounts is toxic. Intake of a wide variety of foods and recommended supplements helps optimize brain function in older persons.

Complex Physiological Correlates · Osteoporosis, decrease in bone density with increased bone fragility, is a common cause of fractures, one of the major causes of disability and death among elderly. This well illustrates the complexities underlying the physiological changes in aging. Women are more prone to osteoporosis because of accelerated bone loss triggered by hormonal changes accompanying menopause. Inadequate exposure to sunlight, lack of physical activity, and smoking are additional factors closely associated with osteoporosis. Adequate intake of calcium and vitamin D is essential for preventing osteoporosis. Regular physical exercise also promotes bone density. Milk and dairy products, fish, egg, soybean, green leafy vegetables, cereals, and millet are important sources of calcium. The bioavailability of calcium in vegetable products, however, is low. Many elderly people may find milk difficult to digest due to decreased lactase secretion. Such persons and those who are strict vegetarians may need to take adequate supplemental calcium. Any deficit in this complex chain of factors affecting bone density and strength can render the elderly susceptible to fractures and its consequences.

Preventive Care

It needs to be emphasized that most of the ailments categorized as old-age diseases are not only curable if diagnosed at the right time but can also be avoided with a proper lifestyle. Aging begins right

after birth and its effects are noticeable soon after one reaches adulthood; so caring for one's health through proper diet and exercise in youth and middle age is essential to prevent old-age diseases and minimize their complications.

In answer to Dharma's query about the surprise of surprises, Yudhishtira said, 'It is indeed a wonder that though every day people die, the rest wish to live for all eternity.' Curiously, not to speak of living for all eternity, often we do not even work for a healthy and happy living. In developed societies there is widespread awareness of the need for periodic preventive health check-ups right from the time one crosses thirty. Supermarket kiosks allowing blood pressure and blood sugar measurements are common. Smoking is going out of fashion. People are avoiding red meat. Junk food eateries are becoming unpopular.

Unhappily, many of the ills of developed countries are now coming to haunt developing nations. With economic progress there is a definite shift in lifestyle. White-collar jobs have proliferated exponentially and have fostered sedentary habits. Workers are now often glued to their chairs, staring at computer screens. The boom in BPOs, call centres, and cyber-cafes are proving an economic boon for the unemployed, but sitting in the same posture for hours doing the same job all through the day is slowly killing the youth. The loss in future may more than supersede today's gains. Highly competitive and demanding professional jobs are accompanied by significant stress and take a heavy toll on body and mind. This adds up when both husband and wife are working. Affluence is often accompanied by frequent eating out, increase in intake of red meat and junk food, and falling consumption of greens. Pressure of work disrupts one's regular routine and the need to cope with competition and stress draws people surreptitiously into smoking and drinking. Lastly, environmental pollution takes its toll. Body mechanisms fail to adjust to rapidly changing demands and the disruption of one's habitual lifestyle; consequently, minor ailments become common in adult life. This in turn leads to increasing use of over-the-counter

medicines. And indiscriminate use of medicines can have serious side effects in the long run.

Nutrition

Nutrition is probably the most important factor influencing the functional outcome of aging. It is crucial to develop healthy nutritional habits at a young age, as a body nourished properly in youth and middle age is more likely to remain healthy in its terminal days. Many chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and arthritis first assert themselves in middle age and persist into later days, making them unbearable. Nutritional habits are sometimes prime factors in initiating these diseases.

A balanced intake of carbohydrate, protein, fat, vitamins, minerals, roughage, and water is essential all through life. A diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole-grain cereals, and nuts is considered healthy. For the elderly, reduction in harmful saturated fat intake—by choosing low-fat dairy products, fish, lean meat, and liquid vegetable oils—limiting salt and total calories, and increasing calcium intake is recommended. Water is the major component of the human body, necessary for all body functions, including moving nutrients into cells and clearing waste products. The elderly are especially likely to neglect water intake—two litres daily on the average being the standard recommendation. Taking one to four glasses of water first thing in the morning can dramatically improve one's sense of well-being. Ayurvedic practitioners also stress the importance of proper bowel clearance.

For the average elderly Indian, with limited physical activity, a balanced diet would roughly include 300 g cereals; 150 g pulses, beans, fish, or lean meat; 500 ml fat-free milk; 2–3 cupfuls of vegetables; 1–2 medium-sized fruits; and 30 g of vegetable cooking oil. But textbook prescriptions and nutritional charts often do not work for the elderly. Diet and nutrition in the elderly is a much more complex affair. One must be able to chew food—which can be seriously hampered by poor dental health or ill-fitting dentures—and be able to digest it properly. An aging body produces more of hormones and

Benefits of Exercise

- Makes the heart stronger and improves circulation.
- Decreases blood pressure.
- Decreases the levels of 'bad' cholesterol and improves that of 'good' cholesterol.
- Makes muscles stronger; improves balance, coordination, and flexibility.
- Makes bones denser and stronger; helps prevent falls and fractures.
- Burns calories, helps maintain healthy weight; controls blood sugar, helps prevent and control diabetes.
- Improves digestion; prevents constipation.
- Boosts the immune system.
- Increases endorphin levels, boosts mood and energy, reduces pain, and may lessen depression.
- Improves mental alertness and concentration; helps with sleep.
- Reduces risk of coronary artery disease, heart attack, stroke, colon cancer, osteoporosis, and possibly breast cancer.

neurotransmitters that decrease appetite and less of those that stimulate it. Appetite may be further reduced by failing taste and smell, decreased salivation, and limited physical activity. Loss of appetite and aversion to eating may also have psychological causes, including depression. Chronic diseases and use of certain medicines interfere with appetite and nutrition. Lack of knowledge about healthy feeding habits and the absence of helping hands to cook or serve food in an attractive way are significant causes of under-nutrition in the elderly. Last but not least is the loss of purchasing power to buy the right kind of food. All these factors need to be kept in mind in planning diets for the elderly. Moreover, expert suggestion alone does not usually suffice. One needs to experiment with different type of foods to determine which combination suits one best.

Exercise

Medical experts suggest that 'physical exercise may be the closest thing to the fountain of youth available. It improves overall health and appear-

ance. It can maintain some of the body's functions that decline with aging. It can even restore some functions that have already declined. In addition, people who exercise—regardless of how much they weigh, whether they smoke, or whether they have a disorder—tend to live longer than those who do not exercise.' A physically active lifestyle provides benefits throughout one's lifespan.

One is never too old to start exercising. Concerns about underlying diseases, aches and pains, physical incapacity, and risk of injury are usually unfounded. These obstacles can not only be overcome but can actually be reduced with exercise. Those who are in poor physical condition can benefit by simply increasing the duration of their regular household activities and physical recreation. Walking and climbing stairs—avoiding elevators—are uncomplicated exercises. Exercise programmes should begin with less vigorous routines spanning short durations. Even when intensity and duration are increased, the elderly need to be careful not to become so breathless as to sweat profusely or be unable to talk comfortably. Warming up—doing the same movements as the exercise but less vigorously—before exercise and cooling down, or slowing down gradually at the end of exercise, help prevent injury. Thirty minutes of exercise, at least thrice a week, provides significant benefits.

Endurance, Strengthening, and Stretching • Exercise schedules should optimally involve both aerobic and anaerobic components. The former includes walking, running, cycling, and swimming, and improves endurance. The latter, involving contracting muscles against resistance for up to six seconds at a time, helps increase muscle bulk and strength as well as bone density. Stretching lengthens muscles and tendons, thereby improving flexibility and reducing the risk of injury. It should be done only after warming up, preferably daily. Each stretch may be held for five seconds to begin with, slowly increasing to thirty seconds.

Yoga • This is a holistic health promoter that improves physical as well as mental well-being and is especially suited for the elderly. In recent years there

has been a global resurgence of interest in yoga. New institutes dedicated to yoga are being opened regularly and people are becoming serious about practising it. Many TV channels are dedicating significant time to its practices. Aged people in yoga centres are a common sight today. Thousands enrol when reputed yoga teachers visit their cities and towns. In their eminently readable book *Retired but Not Tired*, B K Trehan and Indu Trehan observe:

Yoga is one of the most effective ways of achieving this harmony [with our physical, mental, and spiritual selves]. Yoga keeps us healthy and happy in a number of ways. It lowers high blood pressure, and raises the same, if it is low. Yoga takes care of obesity, diabetes, arthritis, kidney disorders, sexual dysfunction, asthma, common cough and cold and several other serious ailments. Yoga can relieve you from stress, anxiety and insomnia. Yoga increases your awareness. Our minds become more alert and clear. Yoga improves our inter-personal relationships and dealings with people. We will have more physical, mental and spiritual energy. Our perspective on life changes. We become calmer, regardless of circumstances. Yoga sharpens our inner faculties so that we can discriminate between what is right for us, and what is not. With yoga we learn discipline, our life changes for the better and we discover the joy of living.

A programme of simple yogic postures, *asanas*—Vajrasana, Tadasana, Trikonasana, Bhujangasana, Shalabhasana, Pavanamuktasana, Gomukhasana, Ardha-matsyendrasana, Matsyasana, Marjarasana, Hastapadottanasana, Shashakasana, and the like; the comprehensive Suryanamaskara; simple *pranayama* like Bhastrika, Anuloma-viloma, Kapala-bhati, Ujjayi, and Bhramari; and meditation can profoundly affect one's being for good. However, it is important that yoga be learnt from a competent teacher.

Social Dimensions of Health

The problems of old age are not merely physical. Mental depression, the feeling of being left out, of isolation, is common in old age and is a source of great distress. People who were busy and involved in work for long years suddenly feel unwanted and

rejected after retirement. This is especially true of senior executives who, after being used to having people take directions, find the relative obscurity of retirement—now they may not even be offered a chair if they visit their former offices—terribly damaging to their self-esteem. Given a choice, they would like to go back to work with similar responsibilities, not for any financial gain, but just to be able to play an active role in society. This is the case of the strong ego failing to refashion itself, blind to a different set of opportunities and responsibilities now available, which, if used humbly and judiciously, would open a new phase of life.

Financial security is very important in old age, although the financial freedom to do and have all that one wants is unrealistic for most elderly. As the Trehans point out: 'Though each retirement case may be different, they all follow the same basic principle of finance management—balancing liabilities against assets. That is what every retiree has to do: take stock of his expenses, liabilities, needs, and responsibilities versus income, assets, and resources, and strike a balance between the two.' Insurance cover, savings, and judicious investments are all important aspects of financial security in old age.

But satisfaction in old age is determined more by social adaptation than by physical capabilities or financial security. Older people who are well integrated with their communities have little concern for age. For them their later years mean a new state of mind, a new opportunity to do things that they always wanted to do but could not because of time constraints. 'Studies have shown that people who remain active and who interact with other people during old age live longer, happier, healthier lives. Volunteering, taking classes, joining social groups, engaging in hobbies, and pursuing some type of spiritual or religious practice are all ways of staying connected. Even people who are confined to their homes because of illness can stay connected by having others visit them or by communicating over the telephone or by electronic mail.'

Whatever be the case, at some point in life aged humans have to let go of attachments. There will

Some Health Effects of Meditation

Following are some of the common effects, feelings, or experiences of meditation. To what extent you experience or feel these effects depends on the state of your mind, type and duration of your meditation practice, and the skill achieved in it.

- Meditation brings a sense of relaxation and peacefulness. It controls anger and short temper of which most people are victims in today's stressful environment.
- Concentration improves. You are able to do your work more efficiently and skilfully.
- A concentrated mind brings to surface many new and innovative ideas. You may visualize answers to some of your intricate problems while you are meditating.
- You settle down to deeper levels of quietness and awareness.
- You experience an increased sense of compassion, care, and concern for others.
- You feel a greater sense of purpose in life.
- You start appreciating the hand of God in the universe, especially in the beauty and harmony of nature.
- You begin responding to an inner desire to do the right things for their own sake rather than under legal or moral compulsion.


—Adapted from *Retired but Not Tired*, 199

be times when they will have to be ready to subdue their egos. And when the ego is attenuated, there is great happiness derived from the insights of spiritual living. The elderly may take shelter in books, in spiritual thought and practices, or in rituals. There are old ladies who spend virtually their entire day happily with Gopala, baby Krishna—bathing, dressing, and feeding him and meeting his playful demands. If otherwise undisturbed, the elderly, especially those with significant physical limitations, have to learn to live with themselves or with God. This may be the best preparation for the final departure.

Aged people of today have made significant contributions in building the society in which we live. Society, in turn, must be committed to caring for their health and well-being. A number of governmental as well as non-governmental agencies are

presently working in this area. 'A Society for All Ages', the theme of the 'International Year of Older Persons-1999' helped to advance awareness, research, and policy action worldwide.

In India a 'National Policy on Older Persons', addressing the welfare and care of older people, was adopted in 1999 and was backed by the ninth five-year plan (1997-2002). Financial security, health care, nutritional support, and supplementation of care provided by the family form the principal areas for intervention and strategic action. Under this scheme, financial assistance was provided to NGOs for establishing and running old-age homes, day-care centres, mobile medical care units, and home services for older persons. Special effort was made to strengthen the partnership between the young and the old. A collaborative project involving the Nehru Yuvak Kendra Sangathan to start day-care centres for the elderly was part of this programme. It is important that the helpless and isolated among the elderly be made aware of these facilities.

From what we have discussed it seems apparent that if one has adequate financial security, assured medical services, adequate nutrition, moderately good health, a comfortable home, and a caring community, one can experience a happy and healthy aging. These requirements are not impossible to achieve if one plans one's life and regulates one's lifestyle rightly from young age. However, this 'trying-to-stay-well' concept still lacks something—the ability to accept death gracefully, no matter how it comes. It is difficult to attain this state; one has to evolve into a right state of mind—a sense of contentment with the life spent and a feeling of detachment from it. For most people in India a spiritual environment can help achieve this. For a few others an intellectual atmosphere or an opportunity for philanthropic activity may be more important. For the former group a place like an ashrama in the Indian tradition—where a spiritual guru helps create the right environment—may be suitable. For the other an association of like-minded people is necessary. People caring for the elderly need to ensure that both these facilities are developed. 

Japanese Approach to the Elderly

Prof. Tsuyoshi Nara

THE World Health Organization classifies people between 65 and 74 years of age as 'young old' and those over 74 as 'old old'. The Japanese government follows this definition and calls the first group *zenki-koureisha*, elderly people of the early period, and the second group *kouki-koureisha*, elderly people of the late period. Earlier Japanese societies used the word *roujin*, old person, or *toshi-yori*, aged person, for those who were retired from public working life or whose children were living in their own separate households. If more than 7% of the population of a society comprises old people then that is considered 'an aging society'; when that figure exceeds 14%, it is called 'an aged society'.

The Japanese Aged

In 1920 people above 64 years of age constituted 5.3% of the total Japanese population, a figure that did not change significantly until 1955. During my childhood—1930s—the average lifespan of a Japanese was around 50 years. My own father passed away at the age of 51 and my mother at 52, both due to diseases. However, the proportion of the elderly increased to 7.1% by 1970 and to 11.2% by 1988. Japanese society became a true aged society in 1994, when the percentage of elderly people reached 15.9%. This proportion is expected to climb to 20% by 2010 and stabilize at 23.6% in 2020.

The life dream of the average Japanese citizen in modern society used to be a long and materially luxurious life with lasting physical youth. Fortunately, the luxurious lifestyle has been a reality since the 1980s, when the Japanese nation became a so-called world economic giant, second only to



Eight Taoist Immortals, by Tanu Buncho, 1803

the US. But eternal youth and long life are yet to be realized, although the average lifespan in Japan is now the longest in the world.

According to a post-war demographic survey carried out by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, and supported by researches on average longevity of major advanced nations undertaken by the Institute of Social Security and Population Problem in Japan, the average Japanese lifespan in 1950 was 58 years for males and 62 years for females. These figures indicate that Japanese lifespan

was the shortest among all advanced nations in 1950. Since then, however, the average Japanese has been living longer year after year, and reached the longest lifespan in the world: 72 years for men in 1977 and 79 years for women in 1979. Subsequently, Japan maintained that position for two decades. In 2007 Japan dropped to the third place in male longevity—79.19 years—behind Iceland and Hong Kong—though the female longevity of 85.99 years in Japan is still the world's highest.

The number of centenarians in Japan increased from 153 in 1963 to 1,072 in 1981, soared to 10,158 in 1998, and then tripled again to 36,276 in 2008. The vast majority of people above 100 years of age are women, a proportion that seems to have remained quite steady over time at 85% women and only 15% men.

The short Japanese lifespan before the end of World War II was partly due to high infant mortality, attributable to malnutrition, but largely the result of massive casualties among Japanese military personnel and the civilian holocaust resulting from US military attacks, including the two atomic bombings. After the war, the gradual improvement of nutrition and sanitary conditions for infants as well as adults and absolutely warless safe conditions have contributed to lengthening Japanese lifespan. The introduction of a full lunchtime meal system for all schoolchildren throughout Japan was also an important factor in improving health and lifespan.

A compulsory national health insurance scheme that includes: (i) improved public health through periodic general health checks, and (ii) free or subsidized advanced medical treatment also contrib-

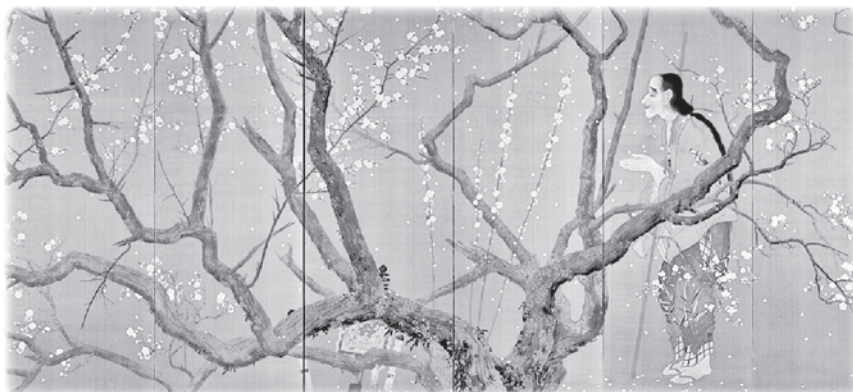
uted to Japanese longevity. Dr Takuji Shirasawa, director of general research at the Institute for the Elderly, Tokyo Metropolitan Government, studied the lives of those living more than a century, and reached the conclusion that the span of human life is determined partly (25%) by genes but mostly (75%) by lifestyle.

The lifestyle factors influencing longevity, as identified by Dr Shirasawa, are: (i) eating habits, (ii) physical exercise, and (iii) way of thinking and feeling. Of these, he says, the most important is the first one. Many specialists on aging have focused on controlling the intake of active oxygen and free radicals when preparing any healthy menu for the elderly. They recommend plenty of organic vegetables and fruits, along with a minimum of fish or meat.

It goes without saying that moderate physical exercise also helps a person maintain good health. A similar effect can be expected for one who always maintains a positive way of thinking and feeling. Saburou Shouchi, who at 102 years is still active as the director of Shii-no-mi School for handicapped children, has been conducting overseas lecture tours to many educational institutions since he turned 95. Whenever he delivers a lecture, he makes it a point to recommend his audiences to think and act positively, and to keep big smiles. He always emphasizes the importance of mothers affectionately touching their children's skin during the first three years of life. The effect on human longevity of smiling and keeping a sense of humour are also endorsed by Dr Thomas T Pearls, specialist in centenarian studies at Boston University School of Medicine.

As the majority of Japanese workers, irrespective of the nature of their job, are actually fond of working, they are often made fun of as belonging to 'a nation of workaholics'. And rightly so; most of them cannot enjoy retirement if they have no work to do. They cannot just sit idle at home. Therefore, some go as senior volunteers to developing countries to impart technical

Yoroboshi, 'The Beggar Monk', by Shimomura Kazan, 1915



know-how or management skills to local workers or farmers—they are sent by institutions like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) or the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual, and Cultural Advancement International (OISCA).

Some well-off elderly make frequent trips abroad to visit world heritage sites and other tourist destinations. But most middle-class elderly spend their free time attending cultural schools or lectures, generally for: (i) composing Japanese poetry such as haiku (in 17 syllables) or tanka (in 31 syllables), (ii) learning flower arrangement and bonsai, (iii) practising calligraphy, (iv) doing sumi-e—Japanese-ink drawings—or oil paintings, (v) making Japanese dolls or Buddha images, (vi) choral singing, (vii) playing a Japanese musical instrument called Taisho lyre, (viii) pursuing Japanese or Hawaiian dance, (ix) visiting a park or other open space to play gate-ball—Japanese croquet—devised especially for elderly players, (x) touring hot springs, and (xi) making a pilgrimage to the Eighty-Eight Holy Places on Shikoku Island. These are the most common options, though of course there are many more.

The Other Face of Aging in Japan

The above description of demographic changes among the Japanese elderly may give non-Japanese readers an impression of Japanese society as ideal or a kind of paradise. In fact, long lifespan is only half of the Japanese reality. One must also take into account the other half, the pathetic and painful aspects of being old in Japanese society.

Before the war it was common for a Japanese household to comprise three generations. Parents, the eldest son and his wife, and their children; all used to live together in the same house. According to the tradition, the eldest son was to inherit his parents' property, including money, house, land, and the rest. In return, he had to remain with his parents, caring for them until they passed away. Meanwhile, other sons or daughters were expected to leave and start their own households.

After the war this tradition changed drastically. Today, when sons or daughters marry, they leave

their parents' house and take up residence in different locations. The reason for this drastic social change can be attributed to an amendment of the Civil Law Act that abolished the right of primogeniture and introduced equal right of inheritance, a step taken by US occupation authorities seeking to revise the Japanese constitution. As a result of this legal amendment, few children are inclined to take responsibility for the welfare of their aged parents.

We can confirm this situation by glancing at the 'Fundamental Inquiry on National Life', carried out by the Japanese Government in 2000:

- Households having an elderly member: 15,657,000—34.4% of total households.
- Households consisting of an elderly couple: 4,234,000—27.1% of total households with elderly persons.
- Households consisting of three generations: 4,141,000—26.5% of total households with elderly persons.
- Households consisting of a single elderly person: 3,079,000—19.7% of total households with elderly persons.

It is a pity that the number of aged people dying alone and unattended is increasing year after year. In Tokyo 2,718 single elderly persons passed away during 2004 alone. These days it is common in Japanese society for an aged husband and wife to care for each other without depending on their children. If one of them happens to become disabled, the other has to support him or her with the help of a son or daughter living nearby or of a healthcare professional. If both become disabled, admission into a nursing home is the only alternative.



Self-portrait, by Katsushika Hokusai, 1839 (sumi-e painting)

At present approximately 400,000 disabled elderly persons are living in nursing homes run by the government. But there are another 382,000 persons waiting to be admitted into such homes. Though there are many non-governmental nursing homes, the admission fee—10 to 20 million yen (about 5.3 to 10.6 million rupees)—and monthly boarding charges are too high for the ordinary elderly, subsisting on savings and pension, to afford. Some among those on the waiting list become impatient and go to less expensive nursing homes abroad, for example to the Philippines.

It is also alarming to observe the increasing number of elderly who are unable to cope with living alone and end up committing suicide. Most of them have lost their spouse or children and do not want to trouble other relatives. The number of elderly suicides rose to 12,107 in 2007, which represented 33.7% of all Japanese suicides during that year. As the elderly become disabled, they have to depend upon either their children or voluntary or professional caregivers. If the children are engaged in regular work or service, it may not be possible for them to properly look after their parents or parents-in-law, even if they are willing to do so. Therefore, the services of voluntary or professional caregivers are unavoidable and increasingly in demand. Given this social necessity, many young and recently retired people are coming forward to train as qualified professional caregivers. Furthermore, many governmental and non-governmental organizations have been established to provide qualified care to any elderly person who needs such help and is willing and able to pay for it.

Unfortunately, the remuneration for such services—irregular and difficult as they are—is not sufficient for maintaining a family or even for one's own expenses. This phenomenon is caused partly by governmental undervaluing of caregiver labour and partly by the malpractices of some temporary staffing agencies that exploit caregivers. As a result, the number of caregivers has been rapidly decreasing of late despite increasing demand for such services from the helpless elderly. To fill up this gap

the Japanese government has recently brought a few hundred 'caregiver candidates' from the Philippines and Indonesia. Their contracts are for four years and within that time they are required to become qualified as professional caregivers by passing a national examination in Japan. This is a tough trial, and we must wait four years to see whether this effort will prove a success.

Whenever we discuss the issue of elderly in Japanese society we should keep in mind that the majority of elderly Japanese no longer desire a long life. They would prefer to live healthy and happy, even if not for long. They wish to pass away from this mundane world without giving any trouble to others, whoever they may be. They think it a shame to trouble others or depend on mercy or charity. They wish to maintain a sense of self-respect rather than lose face by drawing attention and care associated with pity. In Japan, several Buddhist temples have installed the image of *Yome-raku-kannon*, Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara, whose function is to make a daughter-in-law's life easy and comfortable. Here 'to make a daughter-in-law's life easy' implies that the elderly person wants to maintain his or her pride and dignity by not depending on a daughter-in-law's care. This Bodhisattva is very popular among the elderly and particularly draws aged female worshippers who are keen to die suddenly without suffering from any disease. They want to preserve their good health so that they can avoid depending upon their daughter-in-law's nursing.

In order to honour these wishes of the elderly, one should always take special care to avoid such language or gesture as may hurt their sense of pride and dignity. For instance, the aged Japanese prefer to be addressed as *oji-san*, uncle, rather than *ojii-san*, grandfather or grandpa, or as *oba-san*, aunty, rather than *obaa-san*, grandmother or grandma. Elderly women, in particular, will be happier to be called *oku-sama*, madam, rather than *oba-san* or *obaa-san*. Most importantly, when attending to or assisting disabled elderly people, one should treat them not as children but as dignified adults.

(Continued on page 300)

Worship of God as Mother in the Indian Tradition

Swami Satyasthananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

In the Tantras

THE conception of God as Divine Mother attained its fullest flowering at the hands of the Shakta followers of Hinduism. They not only developed the elaborate forms and rituals connected with Shakti-worship, but also gave a profound philosophical basis to their faith and practice. The vast Tantra literature represents not only the various cults and ritualistic practices of Shaktism but also its religious ideology and philosophy. It would not be incorrect to say that in Shaktism Mother-worship attained its culmination.

According to the Shakta philosophy enshrined in the Tantras, the ultimate Reality as pure unchanging Consciousness is called Shiva, and its power, appearing as the flux of mind and matter in Creation is known as Shakti—the Cosmic Power or Primordial Energy. Shiva is pure Being, devoid of all relativity. Shakti is the active Personal Being and includes all individual souls. The opening verse of the *Saundaryalahari* reads: 'Shiva, when he is united with Shakti, is able to create; otherwise he is unable even to move.' Shiva and Shakti have been described as *prakāśa*, light, and *vimarśa*, reflection. The first semblance of relationship appearing within the Absolute is termed *vimarśa*; this is the source of the world of distinctions. *Vimarśa* or Shakti is the power latent in the Absolute, the pure Consciousness.

Shakti is the Absolute personified, Consciousness that becomes a subject and also passes over into its opposite, the non-self or the object. If Shiva is *cit*, Consciousness, Shakti is *citi-śakti*, the formative energy of consciousness. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva perform their respective functions of

Durga
Mahishasura-
mardini,
picture of the
Guler School
by an unknown
artist of the
early 18th
century



creation, preservation, and destruction in obedience to Shakti. In the perfect experience of ananda, Shiva and Shakti are indistinguishable; the two coalesce into one Being. Shiva answers to the indeterminate Brahman in a state of quiescence; Shakti is determinate Brahman—endowed with *icchā*, will, *jñāna*, knowledge, and *kriyā*, action—that projects the whole objective universe. Shiva and Shakti are one, since power is inherent in existence. But though they are identical, there is an apparent difference between them from the phenomenal standpoint. Brahman in its transcendental aspect does not change, but as Shakti, it does. This Shakti or Primordial Energy goes forth in a series of emanations which the Tantras term *tattvas*, of which thirty-six are described.

The Tantras also speak of three states of the Divine Mother: (i) *parā*, the transcendental, which is beyond mental categories; (ii) *sūkṣmā*, the subtle, which is embodied in the mantra; and (iii) *sthūlā*, or gross, which is the form she takes to guide and help devotees who worship her and meditate upon her. The Divine Mother can assume various forms to meet the spiritual needs of devotees. The Mahavidyas are ten such forms, each with distinctive attributes.

The Ten Mahavidyas

- **Kali**, also called Shyama, is three-eyed, dark-complexioned, fierce, and irascible. She sports a garland of decapitated human heads and a girdle of severed hands, and holds a decapitated head and a bloodied cleaver in two of her hands, while the other two arms gesture bestowal of boons and fearlessness. She is given many other epithets according to the predominance of certain attributes: Smashana-kali dwells in cremation grounds, Raksha-kali guards against famine and epidemics, Bhadra-kali is her benign form that can be worshipped in homes, Guhya-kali and Siddha-kali are objects of adoration for advanced practitioners of Tantric disciplines, and Maha-kali is the cosmic form of the deity.

- **Tara**, as described in the context of the Mahavidyas, is much like Kali. She is dark, short, and large-bellied, wears a tiger skin and a necklace of severed heads, sports her hair in a single braid, and stands upon a burning pyre. Her worship was especially popular in Kashmir. She is also revered as an important deity—in such forms as Sita-tara, Shyama-tara, Pita-tara, Nila-tara, and Khadiravani-tara—in Mahayana Buddhism.

- **Shodashi** is the benign form of the Devi—a beautiful girl of sixteen with a ruddy complexion, worshipped from Kashmir to Kerala. In her the divine power reached its fullness. Her name signifies this fullness of beauty and grandeur—much like the full moon displaying all its sixteen parts. Because of her beauty and grandeur she is also known as Tripurasundari and Rajarajeshwari. Nearly fifty forms are attributed to her, which shows her wide popularity.

- **Bhuvaneshwari** is another benign form of the Devi. Her sattvic nature is reflected in her bright complexion. Her control of the elements is represented by the noose and goad that she holds, and her grace by the fruit in her hand.

- **Bhairavi** has a red complexion, sports a garland of severed heads, and holds a rosary and a book in two of her four hands, the other two bestowing boons and fearlessness. Siddha-bhairavi, Tripura-bhairavi, and Bhuvaneshwara-bhairavi are some of the other names of this deity. She is associated with Batuk-bhairava as her consort.

- **Chhinnamasta** stands naked in the cremation ground with a blood-stained scimitar in one hand and her own severed head—drinking the warm blood gushing from her headless trunk—in the other.

- **Dhumavati** is visualized as a pale, tall, elderly, edentulous, querulous widow, with dishevelled hair and dirty clothes. Afflicted with hunger, she holds a winnowing basket in her hand and is seen astride a crow.

- **Bagala** is golden hued with the head of a crane. Seated on a lotus she has a noose and a thunderbolt in two of her hands. She holds an enemy by the tongue while chastising him with a club. According to the *Sammohana Tantra* she manifested herself near the Haridra Lake in Saurashtra, in response to Vishnu's penance to help quell a storm that threatened to destroy the worlds.

- **Matangi** or Sumukhi, manifested on earth when the Devi was propitiated by Rishi Matanga, according to the *Brahma Yamala*. Dark coloured, she is seen seated on an ornamented



The Goddess Kali, by Richard B Godfrey, 1770

throne, has the crescent moon on her forehead and wields a noose, a goad, a sword, and a shield in each of her four arms.

- **Kamala** is the goddess of prosperity—and is thus a manifestation of Lakshmi. She is golden-hued and exquisitely beautiful and is described as seated on a red lotus, holding lotuses in her hands, and attended by elephants pouring out pitcherfuls of water over her.

The worship of Shakti is classified under two main heads: *paśvācāra* and *virācāra*. Different spiritual exercises are prescribed by the Tantras for different groups of aspirants. *Paśvācāra* is the code of conduct for aspirants with marked inertia and ignorance, and *virācāra* for comparatively advanced votaries with significant ambition and energy.

The *Kulārṇava Tantra* gives a more elaborate classification of Tantric practice: (i) *vedācāra*, (ii) *vaiṣṇavācāra*, (iii) *śaivācāra*, (iv) *dakṣiṇācāra*, (v) *vāmācāra*, (vi) *siddhāntācāra*, (vii) *kaulācāra*. Each successive stage represents a more advanced practice—the *kaulācāra* being the culmination of Tantric discipline. The first three stages comprise *paśvācāra*, the two next *virācāra*, while the two final stages represent *divyācāra*, the state of the *siddha* or adept. *Vedācāra* lays stress on the cultivation of cleanliness of body and mind. Aspirants in this stage are to rise early in the morning—two hours before sunrise—and practise meditation and prayer. They should honour the spiritual guide with prostrations, practise japa of the Divine Mother's mantra, meditate on her as seated on the thousand-petalled lotus in the crown of the head, worship her with the prescribed accessories, and contemplate the Supreme Power with undivided attention. Purity is the watchword of *vaiṣṇavācāra*. It lays stress on cultivation of devotion and vigilance in performance of one's duties. Aspirants in this stage are to practise continence in thought, word, and deed and give up jealousy and hypocrisy. *Śaivācāra* emphasizes cultivation of jnana, besides the primary disciplines of the earlier stages. *Dakṣiṇācāra* aims at consolidating the gains of the three preceding stages. In this stage the *sadhaka* practises worship of the Divine Mother with offerings and meditation on her divine form in the dead of night. With *vāmācāra* begins the more difficult practice of renunciation in the midst of objects of enjoyment. In this stage the guru introduces the *sadhaka* to esoteric practices involving flesh, wine, and women as objects of veneration. *Siddhāntācāra* involves devoted worship of the Divine Mother at night with offerings purified by the mystic power

of mantras. By this means even objects previously considered impure may now be offered to the Divine Mother. It is in this stage that the aspirant arrives at a definitive understanding of the relative merits of the paths of enjoyment and renunciation. *Kaulācāra* is the stage when the Divine Mother or Brahman becomes a reality to the aspirant. The *kaula*, as the aspirant is now called, can worship the Divine Mother without consideration of time, place, or ritualistic details. *Kaulas* often behave in peculiar ways. At times they may appear insane, at other times ghoulish—their diverse divine moods manifesting through weeping, laughter, singing, and dancing. Established in same-sightedness, they view clay and sandal paste, friend and enemy, palaces and burning ghats, money and grass as being the same. They are so immersed in the thought of the Divine Mother that other objects and thoughts have no place in their minds.

Shakta theory and practice are closely associated with the mystical dimensions of yoga. The deep study of the power of sound as manifest in sacred syllables and mantras is an important contribution of the Shakta system. *Śabda*, the eternal Word, is none other than Shakti. It manifests the objective world through its primal creative momenta termed *nāda*, *bindu*, and *bija*. Every letter of the alphabet is imbued with the power of Shakti; and mantras—words or phrases framed from these letters in accordance with their inner powers—are important means for accessing Shakti. Every mantra is a divine creation, and the whole body of mantras is identical with Shakti.

Tantra also tells us that within the human frame there are numerous subtle channels of power called *nāḍīs*. The most important of these is the *suṣūmṇā*, spanning the spinal column from the sacral plexus to the crown of the head. Along the *suṣūmṇā* are important centres of power called *cakras*, represented by mystical lotuses. The first of these, the *mūlādhāra*, is at the base of the spine. It houses the dormant Shakti called kundalini, coiled round the primordial linga, representing Brahman, like a serpent. Shakta yogic practices activate the kundalini

and induce it to ascend through the *suṣumṇā*. As the kundalini passes through each of the *cakras* it provides the sadhaka with unique spiritual experiences and powers.

The Shaktas have also developed the use of mystical diagrams—*yantras* or *maṇḍalas*, often engraved on metal plates—ritual gestures or *mudrās*, and ritual procedures for sacralization of the human body, *nyāsa*, using mystic syllables called *bīja*. Each of the deities worshipped by the Shaktas has an associated *yantra*, which is usually placed in the centre of a lotus-diagram with the *bīja* of the particular goddess inscribed a certain number of times on each petal. The Sri-cakra is one such *yantra* representing the orb of the earth, the nine triangles within it denoting the nine continents. In the centre is the dot or *bindu* representing Shakti as presiding over the *cakra*. These *yantras* are as efficacious in manifesting the deities as mantras. To the Tantric, the consecrated *yantra* is none other than the deity itself.

Great Worshippers of the Divine Mother

From its very beginnings Hindu civilization has given birth to great men and women devoted to the Divine Mother. Sri Rama worshipped Devi Durga on the eve of his fight with Ravana. Rukmini worshipped Durga and sought her blessings for her marriage with Sri Krishna. Shankaracharya, the great Advaitic philosopher-saint, is well known not only for his commentaries on Advaitic texts, but also for his soul-stirring devotional hymns to the various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. He composed several hymns in praise of the Divine Mother and also installed the images of the goddesses Kamakshi and Sarada at Kanchipuram and Sringeri. His lucid exposition of the concept of Shakti is manifest in his hymns:

*Śivaḥ śaktyā yukto yadi bhavati
śaktaḥ prabhavitum
na cedevam devo na khalu kuśalah
spanditum-api;*

*Atas-tvām-ārādhyām hari-hara-
viriñcādibhir-api
praṇantuṁ stotuṁ vā
katham-akṛta-puṇyaḥ prabhavati.*

Shiva is able to project this universe only if he is united with Shakti, otherwise the Deva is not even capable of moving. Therefore, how can those who have done no meritorious deeds ever strive either to worship or praise you who are worshipped even by Hari, Hara, Brahma, and others?¹⁰

*Bhavāni tvam dāse
mayi vitara dṛṣṭim sakaruṇām
iti stotuṁ vāñchan
kathayati bhavāni tvam-iti yaḥ;
Tadaiva tvam tasmai
diśasi nija-sāyujya-padaviṁ
mukunda-brahmendrapadā-
sphuṭa-mukuṭa-nīrājita-padām.*

To the devotee desirous of thus praying to you: 'O Bhavani, please cast your compassionate glance on me, your servant', even as he begins saying 'O Bhavani' you bestow on him *sāyujya*, union with your feet—the *sāyujya* that is illumined by the crowns of Vishnu, Brahma, and Indra (22).

In modern times Shakti worship has especially flourished in east India. The songs of such Tantric adepts as Ramprasad and Kamalakanta not only reveal an exquisite poetic sense but also deep philosophical insights about Tantric practices born of their own realizations. This process reached its culmination in Sri Ramakrishna, who showed how the Divine Mother could become a living reality in our lives, and also in Sri Sarada Devi, whose acceptance of the fruits of Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana in the form of Devi Shodashi and the wonderful expression of motherhood in her life show us how this divine motherhood can actually manifest in human form for the all-round uplift of society. In this sense they represent the fulfilment of the worship of the Divine Mother that has captured the Indian mind for millennia.

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Reference

10. Shankaracharya, *Saundaryalahari*, 1.

Narada Bhakti Sutra

Swami Bhaskareswarananda

(Continued from the February issue)

39. Mahat-saṅgastu

durlabho'gamyo'moghaśca.

But the holy company of great souls is rare, incomprehensible, and infallible.

MERELY taking spiritual initiation, because it is the custom, does not constitute *mahat-saṅga*, holy company. It is then simply a mechanical event. Hence, the sadhaka must know the meaning of holy company.

Saṅga is not physical company. The sadhaka must feel the transcendental spiritual personality of the *mahāpuruṣa*, great soul. For this, one must have receptivity, which develops through sadhana. Narada says it is *durlabha*, extremely difficult to obtain. First, realized personalities themselves are rare. Second, their company or contact, *saṅga*, is still more difficult to obtain. Going to them, bowing down to them, and talking to them is not *saṅga*. *Saṅga* is *durlabha* because it occurs when you are fit to receive their grace. Only then will you realize the greatness of a spiritual soul.

This is possible only when you rise above sense enjoyment, are really hungry for spirituality, and have a transcendental attitude. The transcendental beauty of spiritual personalities lies in their being absolutely unidentified with the world and completely identified with the absolute Reality. If you can feel this transcendental beauty through your *vairāgya*, then will *saṅga* have its effect on your personality. If you surrender absolutely to such a soul, then will contact or *saṅga* take place, because his personality

is transcendently universal. We have seen many cases of so-called *saṅga* without this receptivity ruining the person concerned. Why did this happen? Because of engaging in *saṅga* with one's own ego, likes and dislikes, and selfish interests.

True *saṅga* is *agamyā*, for it is very difficult to appreciate the personality of great souls. There is no outward change in their appearance; only their consciousness changes. If your *saṅga* is real and genuine, its effect will be infallible, *amogha*. There is no question of 'whether or not'; have infinite faith in the personality and words of the preceptor. We get an excellent example of this in Swami Vivekananda. See how he ran to Sri Ramakrishna; this shows his *vairāgya*, his thirst for samadhi. Look at his faith in the Master, his surrender to him, and his pursuit of the Master's teachings. Finally, he entered into samadhi by Sri Ramakrishna's grace.

40. Labhyate'pi tat-kṛpayaiva.

It is obtained by their grace alone.

The sadhaka may get depressed thinking that if holy company is *durlabha* he may not get the grace of great men or God. Narada says that if you fulfil the conditions then you will get it by the grace of the Lord. Divine grace will respond to your sincerity. This is the story in the spiritual world. Divinity, which is your real nature, responds to your sincere spiritual quest in the form of holy company, *mahat-saṅga*.

41. Tasminstajjane bhedābhāvāt.

Because there is no difference between God and his devotees.

The *mahāpuruṣa* does not belong to this objective world. He always remains attuned to the absolute Reality. There is no *bheda*, difference, between him

The text comprises the edited notes of Swami Bhaskareswarananda's classes on the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, taken down by some residents of the Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur. The classes were conducted between 17 December 1965 and 24 January 1966.

and the absolute Reality. Hence, if your spiritual quest is sincere, you will never be deprived of the grace of the Lord through the *mahāpuruṣa*.

42. Tadeva sādhyatām tadeva sādhyatām.

Try for that—mahat-saṅga—alone.

Narada emphatically repeats *sādhyatām, sādhyatām*. Do try to perform this main spiritual practice of making yourself a fit recipient of grace. You may carry out all the negative and positive practices, but never forget that the human mind is very deceptive. You may develop egotism and become a guru yourself. So you must surrender yourself to a great soul. Try to get attuned to his real personality through self-surrender. This is so important that Narada has made it a separate issue.

43. Dussaṅgaḥ sarvathaiva tyājyaḥ.

Evil company must be totally given up.

After describing ideal bhakti, *parā-bhakti*, and the conditions for it, Narada tells us the negative and positive sadhanas. Then he says that all this will be successful if you surrender completely to a *mahāpuruṣa* who is none other than God himself in living form. Now Narada takes up a very practical issue. A sadhaka is after all a struggling aspirant and has necessarily a combination of good and bad samskaras. Narada warns that *asat-saṅga* or contact with evil might be occurring unconsciously. *Dussaṅga*, evil company, does not only mean the company of drunkards or prostitutes; it implies any object or circumstance that awakens bad samskaras. Any object—even an inanimate one—any circumstance, or any place which arouses evil instincts is *dussaṅga*.

Sarvathā, by all means, unconditionally and uncompromisingly. Sri Ramakrishna rebuked Narendra for discussing worldly matters with Mahendranath Gupta, M. And he rebuked M too. This uncompromising attitude was taught by Sri Ramakrishna to his disciples.


You may say, 'Everything is Narayana.' In that case, remember the story of the 'elephant Narayana' and the 'mahout Narayana' as told by Sri Ramakrishna. You must be aware of the truth of Nara-

yana everywhere, but you must also beware of the evil effects of bad association.

(To be continued)


(Continued from page 284)

Dinner was over. My co-passenger turned jovial again and started telling me some funny anecdotes from his early life. References to his son were coming back again and again, he looked happy now.

All the thoughts of old age, every statement about Vanaprastha and death seemed meaningless in the morning. In a short time the train would enter Victoria Terminus. The smiling face of my grandson on the platform would rekindle my passion for life, and I would wish to live another hundred years. As Swami Vivekananda says: 'This is maya.' 

(Continued from page 294)

Finally, all of us would do well to put in constant effort to have as many close friends as possible before we become old. Through regular social service or personal care for others in need, we can naturally attract many people who will feel thankful to us, and in our last years we will find ourselves surrounded by well-wishers more reliable than our own relatives. A person who gives generously of him- or herself will never be left alone and will pass his or her last days attended with respect and love by many friends or neighbours, if not by kin. A Japanese proverb says, '*tooku-no-shinrui yori chikaku-no-tanin*, non-relatives living close are better than relatives living far away'.

People in BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and other rapidly developing countries will soon face situations similar to those now confronting the Japanese elderly. While enjoying their material luxury, they are likely to suffer from various physical ailments and, possibly even more, from emotional pain arising from inharmonious human relationships. I hope they will learn valuable lessons from both the positive and negative aspects of the Japanese approach described in this article. 

Girish and Sri Sarada Devi

Swami Chetanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

SWAMI Bodhananda left a vivid account of Girish's visit to Jayrambati in 1891, which is presented here in an abridged form: 'Our party consisted of Swami Niranjanananda, Swami Subodhananda, Girish, Kanai [later Swami Nirbhayananda], Kalikrishna [later Swami Virajananda], and myself. Girish also took a cook and a servant with him. After breakfast at Girish's house we left for Howrah railway station and then reached Burdwan station at noon. We had our lunch there and bought luchis, fried potatoes, halwa, and sweets for our supper, and some special sweets to offer to the Master in Kamarpukur. Five bullock carts were hired and we started our journey just before evening. We crossed the Damodar River, which was almost dry. After crossing the river by bullock cart, we finished our supper. At 10.00 p.m. we resumed our journey, but shortly after the jerking motion of the cart upset Girish's stomach. We were then in the middle of a vast meadow. Swami Niranjanananda stopped all the carts and asked the drivers to unfasten the bullocks from the carts. Within an hour Girish fell asleep and then in the morning he felt normal.

'We resumed our journey and reached Uchalan (16 miles from Burdwan) at 10.00 a.m. We went to an inn and had lunch. After resting we had tea. We again bought luchis, fried potatoes, and halwa for supper. The drivers drove the whole night, covering sixteen miles from Uchalan to Kamarpukur. We arrived there at 9.00 a.m. and met Brother Ramlal and Sister Lakshmi, the Master's nephew and niece. We took a bath in the Haldarpukur, had the prasad of Raghuvir, and spent the night at Kamarpukur. Next morning we left for Jayrambati, which is four miles from Kamarpukur. Girish went by palanquin and the rest of us walked along the mud road. We arrived in Jayrambati at 11.00 a.m. Girish took a bath in the

Talpukur and went to visit the Holy Mother wearing his wet cloth and carrying a mango in his hand. He fell flat on the courtyard and bowed down to the Mother. This scene is still vivid in my memory.

'I had a great opportunity to associate closely with Girish in Jayrambati. We lived in the same room; we ate together, walked together, and talked freely. When he was in the mood, he would sing some devotional songs in praise of the Divine Mother.

'Because of the many guests in Jayrambati, Holy Mother was extremely busy from morning till 11.00 p.m. taking care of our food, sleeping arrangements, and so on. Although Girish's cook and servant worked, the Mother had to supervise everything. It was not easy to get milk early in the morning in Jayrambati, but the Mother would go to the villagers and collect some milk so that we could have tea. We had breakfast with puffed rice, sandesh, and tea; and then after a bath we had some prasad. Mother served lunch with eight or nine kinds of preparations, as well as curd and sweets. In the afternoon we had tea and snacks, and at supper luchi, rice, vegetables, and sweets.

'Girish would listen to the dialect of the illiterate farmers and imitate their language. He considered hiring a farmer and bringing him to Calcutta to act in one of his plays. After staying for two weeks in Jayrambati, everyone returned to Calcutta except Swami Niranjanananda and Girish. The Mother looked after us as her own children. I still remember that I rolled chapatis a few times and the Mother baked them. It was her grace that I could be near her. Those are unforgettable memories!'³

Swami Nikhilananda, author of *Holy Mother*, supplied some more information about Girish and Holy Mother:

After bathing, Girish went to the Mother, his body quaking with emotion. Casting his eyes upon

her, he exclaimed with surprise: 'Ah, you are that Mother!' He suddenly recalled a vivid dream of many years before, when he had been bedridden with a serious illness. A goddess appeared to him and offered sacred prasād, which immediately cured him. He now recognized Holy Mother as that deity and felt that she had always been looking after him as his guardian angel. He asked the Mother: 'What sort of Mother are you?' At once Holy Mother replied: 'Your real Mother, not just the wife of your guru, nor an adopted mother, nor a vague mother. Your real Mother.'⁴

Girish spent a happy and carefree time at Jayrambati, wandering about freely with the villagers in the meadows and drinking in the beauty of the sunset in the open fields. Soon his fame spread throughout the area and he would sing now and then to entertain the simple villagers. One day, while Girish was singing for the villagers, Holy Mother heard him singing this song:

Gopāla crawls off from the queen
Lest she should catch hold of him.
He casts at her a furtive glance.
As she eagerly cries, 'Stop, stop!'
Gopāla crawls farther off (273).

One day at Jayrambati Girish had a heated discussion with Kalikumar, one of the Mother's brothers, regarding whether Holy Mother was an ordinary human being or a goddess. Kalikumar naturally regarded her as his sister and said: 'It is you who call her the Divine Mother or the Mother of the Universe. But we were born from the same womb. I do not understand what you say.' 'What are you talking about?' replied Girish firmly. 'You are the son of an ordinary brāhmin, born and reared in a village. You have forgotten the duties of your caste, such as worship and study, and are now living as a farmer. If a man promises you a bullock for your plough, you will run after him for at least six months. Is it not possible for Mahāmāyā, who can make the impossible possible, to appear as your sister and hoodwink you for the rest of your life? Listen to me. If you want liberation in this life or afterwards, go immediately to the Mother and take

refuge at her feet. I urge you to go at once.'

Girish's words always carried great power. Kalikumar went to Holy Mother and clutched her feet, begging for her grace. She said: 'Kali, what are you doing? I am your sister. What are you saying?' Kalikumar returned to Girish the same person he was before. Girish asked him to go back, but he would not. Girish once remarked that Holy Mother's brothers must have performed bone-breaking austerities in a previous life to have obtained her as their sister (123).

Holy Mother always wore a veil when she was with the monastic disciples and male devotees of the Master, except for Swamis Adbhutananda, Advaitananda, and a few others. When Girish ate his lunch at Jayrambati, the Mother would say to him from behind her veil: 'My son, please have a little more rice. You will feel hungry if you eat such a small amount of food.' Girish was overwhelmed by Holy Mother's affection. Observing her shyness and unwillingness to talk to her male devotees, Girish once told her: 'Mother, the Master has become a *chhabhi* [a picture] and you have become a *bauma* [a bashful bride who wears a long veil].'⁵ Girish meant that people now see the Master only in a picture, so the Mother should not maintain so much distance from and formality with her children.

Girish later recalled his days in Jayrambati: 'What infinite affection did I see in the Mother! She was my real mother. She kept her vigilant eyes on every minute detail. One day in Jayrambati I saw the Mother going to the pond with a piece of soap, a bed sheet, and a pillow cover. When I went to bed that night I found that my pillow cover and bed sheet had been beautifully washed. Tears trickle from my eyes when I think of her affection.'⁶

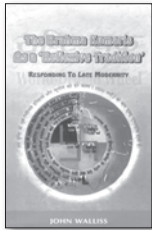
(To be continued)

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REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
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The Brahma Kumaris as a 'Reflexive Tradition'

John Walliss

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 UA Bungalow
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007. E-
mail: mlbd@vsnl.com. 2007. xiv + 131 pp.
Rs 295.

Religious traditions are one of those social structures humans create to fulfil their multifarious needs. Over time, as with all structures, religious traditions lose their following as they are seen inadequate in addressing the changing needs of society. While some traditions appear to doggedly cling to their existing patterns, new movements spring up, supposedly bringing solutions to the questions left unanswered by the older traditions. While some New Religious Movements (NRMs) bring a refreshing change in religious understanding and practice, some others differ from the mainstream religiosity merely to appear novel and more suited to contemporary society.

Engaged in a constant process of adapting themselves to society, religious institutions have never been completely traditional, and constant questioning and rethinking have been integral to them. However, trends of reassessing past traditions and the emergence of new reflexive movements appear to be more pronounced in these postmodern times of ours. Interestingly, most of these new movements draw heavily from the mainstream religiosity, both in their philosophy and practice. For example, while many concepts of mainstream Hinduism like Brahma, Vishnu, and Lakshmi have been woven into the philosophy of the Brahma Kumaris, concepts like *raja yoga*, *kalpa*, and *yuga* have been radically reinterpreted.

NRMs freely reinterpret established principles of religion and supplement or complement them in consonance with the contemporary drift of social thought. For instance, if scientific spirit is dominating the minds of people in a given period, NRMs of that period draw parallels to scientific developments and resort to 'name-dropping' involving scientific thinkers.

Evolved from his doctoral thesis, this timely book by John Walliss is a sociological analysis of the reflexivity of new religious movements and the extent of their 'detraditionalisation'. 'Reflexivity', in sociology, refers to the application of social patterns to the very institutions creating these patterns. Not giving any definition of reflexivity himself, Walliss tries to 'advance and develop Philip Mellor's notion of "reflexive traditions" as a hermeneutic tool for the examination of "post-traditional" spirituality'. Through the example of the inner workings of the Brahma Kumaris, also called Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, Walliss brings out the typical characteristics of an NRM. After discussing various theories of reflexivity of traditions, he proceeds to study Brahma Kumaris in the light of these theories. In his charmingly candid style, he takes us through an intricate study of the phenomenon of reflexive traditions, which will undoubtedly enhance the thought of students of sociology and religion.

Like other new religious movements, Brahma Kumaris had to face severe social opposition before becoming a socially acceptable institution. Consequently, their outlook has become more accommodating in contrast to an earlier isolation. The patterns of the beneficiaries of this movement have been minutely analysed to show the mixed nature of the NRM's following. Though the Brahma Kumaris may not be a typical representative of NRMs, striking similarities to other such movements cannot be denied.

Being a millenarian movement, the Brahma Kumaris have to constantly reinterpret their prophecies and alter or postpone the time of the apocalypse. These reinterpretations have led to inner strife in the institution. Walliss brings forth such differences—which are generally known to crop up amongst the followers of NRMs—by discussing the case of 'Advance Party', a breakaway faction of the Brahma Kumaris, and shows how such factions could themselves be prey to the failings of their parent institution. Concluding this remarkable work on religious movements in the late modern era, Walliss maintains that all religious traditions are reflexive and that the

REPORTS

New Vice President and Treasurer

Swami Prameyananda and Swami Girishananda have been elected vice president and treasurer of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission respectively. They assumed their offices on the holy occasion of Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, 27 February 2009.

News from Branch Centres

Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam, the monthly organ of the Ramakrishna Order in Tamil, published from **Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, held a drawing competition for school and college students from 12 to 26 January to mark the National Youth Day. The winners were awarded cash prizes at a public function held at Vivekananda Illam on 12 January.



About 20,300 participants focused their hearts and minds in attempting to bring out the best features of Swami Vivekananda. Besides Tamilnadu, youth from Kerala, Nagaland, Sri Lanka, and some other countries participated in the competition.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi, celebrated the National Youth Day on 12 January with a procession and a meeting. On 26 January Srmat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj,



Painting exhibition on Swami Vivekananda at Vivekananda Illam

Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated a laboratory building and a seed processing plant at the Divyayan department of the centre.

Ramakrishna Mission TB Sanatorium, Ranchi, also celebrated the National Youth Day with a procession and meeting. On 31 January Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj inaugurated an extension of an indoor ward of the hospital and two renovated buildings for the outdoor section.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur, organized a two-day Kisan Mela, farmers' fair, on 23 and 24 January. About 8,000 farmers from more than 60 villages participated in the mela inaugurated by Sri Kedar Kashyap, Minister, Tribal Welfare Department, Chhattisgarh.

On 29 January Srmat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated a new building at **Ramakrishna Mission Shilpamandira, Belur**, for housing workshops, labs, classrooms, a library, and a drawing hall.

Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Allahabad, organized a medical camp, discourses, and an exhibition on Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji at Triveni Sangam on the occasion of Magh Mela from 9 January to 9 February. About 17,000 patients were treated at the medical camp and nearly 90,000 people witnessed the exhibition.

Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar, organized an All Tripura Devotees' Conference on 8 February. It was attended by 428 devotees.

Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj consecrated the newly built Sri Ramakrishna Temple, with a marble image of Sri Ramakrishna, at **Ramakrishna Math, Barisha**, on 9 February, the sacred birthday



New temple at Barisha

of Swami Adbhutananda. Swami Smarananandaji, Swami Prameyanandaji Maharaj, and Swami Prabhanandaji, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, addressed the public meetings organized on this occasion. In all, about 450 monastics and more than 16,000 devotees attended the function.

A newly built two-storey wing of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramharipur**, was inaugurated on 9 February.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh, conducted a child dental-care and an eye-care programme for children of a backward area of the city. In the former 1,150 children were examined and treated; in the latter 2,247 children of two schools were checked up—291 of them having refractive errors were given free glasses, and 33 with serious visual problems were treated by an eye specialist. The centre conducted another child dental care project in which 371 children of a school in Pinjore, Haryana, were examined and treated.

Relief

Flood Relief · Prolonged torrential rains in the month of January caused one of the worst floods in decades in the western parts of Viti Levu, the largest island in the Republic of Fiji. Towns and villages were submerged for days and thousands of people

huddled in emergency shelters. Nadi centre imme-

Flood relief in Fiji



diately started relief services to flood victims by treating 165 patients, serving 750 plates of cooked food, and distributing 740 kg potatoes, 1,200 packets of biscuits, 550 kg dal, 2,100 kg rice, 96 packets of milk powder, 1,080 l of milk, 100 packets of salt, 250 packets of tea, 500 bottles of mineral water, and other items to more than 1,000 families in Ba, Lautoka, and Nadi cities. The relief work is continuing. On February the following centres in India conducted post-flood relief work: **Katihar** centre distributed 2,500 blankets, 1,671 shawls, and 309 mufflers to flood-affected families in Bihar. **Patna** centre distributed 8,250 blankets, 1,000 shawls, 1,000 woollen jackets, and 24,750 garments to 4,125 flood-affected families of 25 villages in Madhepura, Saharsa, and Supaul districts. Puri Math distributed 200 saris to flood victims of 3 villages in Orissa.

Winter Relief · 18,039 blankets were distributed to needy people in the respective areas of the following centres: Aalo: 1,200; Antpur: 500; Asansol: 707; Bankura: 201; Baranagar Mission: 500; Belgharia: 770; Bhubaneswar: 500; Contai: 300; Cooch Behar: 300; Garbeta: 100; Ghatshila: 123; Guwahati: 250; Ichapur: 1,100; Jayrambati: 1,100; Kamarpukur: 1,700; Kanpur: 347; Koalpara (Jayrambati): 1,852; Limbdi: 117; Muzaffarpur: 55; Puri Math: 1,000; Ramharipur: 1,500; Ranchi Morabadi: 500; Ranchi Sanatorium: 1,002; Sikra Kulingram: 1,115; Swamiji's House (Kolkata): 500; Taki: 700. Besides, the following centres distributed various winter garments to needy persons: Belgharia: 199 sweaters; Garbeta: 125 sweaters; Ichapur: 350 shawls; Kanpur: 179 sweaters.

Distress Relief · The following centres distributed various items to needy people in their respective areas: **Agartala**: 400 saris, 110 dhotis, and 100 children's garments; **Belgaum**: 375 kg rice, 375 kg flour, 75 kg edible oil, and 75 kg dal; **Belgharia**: 1,422 saris, 1,536 dhotis, 857 pants, 822 shirts, and 1,673 children's garments in 8 villages of G Plot Panchayat, South 24 Parganas district; **Bhubaneswar**: 3,965 kg rice, 793 kg dal, 396 l refined oil, 397 kg salt, and 54 kg of milk powder in 9 districts of Orissa; **Chandigarh**: 180 kg rice, 180 kg flour, 36 kg dal, 18 kg oil, 36 kg salt, and 36 kg sugar; **Ichapur**: 2,100 saris and 20 dhotis; **Kanpur**: 50 bed sheets, 60 steel plates, and 60 steel glasses; **Muzaffarpur**: 60 saris and 55 dhotis; **Porbandar**: 2,756 kg rice, 1,250 kg dal, 610 kg sugar, 610 kg oil, 76 kg tea powder, and 300 packets of biscuits in 3 villages of Jamnagar and Porbandar districts; **Sikra Kulingram**: 200 saris, 100 dhotis, and 100 lungis; **Taki**: 500 saris and 50 dhotis. 